They're Coming For You 6

6 6

O. Penn-Coughin

Scary Stories that SCREAM to be Read

They're Coming For You 6
Scary Stories that Scream to be Read

by

O. Penn-Coughin

Published by You Come Too Publishing at Smashwords

Copyright © 2011 O. Penn-Coughin

YOU COME TOO Publishing

Introduction

As always, these stories are meant to be read out loud. **[Instructions are included where necessary—mostly in the form of a good "AAAH!"]**

Also, as always, most of these tales are very short. Sometimes this is referred to as flash or sudden fiction. In this case, we might call it *fright fiction* or *sudden death fiction*.

And finally, as always, it's all for fun and it's all for you.

Sweet screams!

O. Penn-Coughin

The Neighbor

Their neighbor was kind of strange.

They had moved in almost six months ago but the skinny old man still got their names wrong.

"Hello, Wendy," he would say to Ruth. "Wait, you're not Wendy."

Ruth didn't know who Wendy was.

Hello, Edward," he would say to Mark. "Wait, you're not Edward."

Mark didn't know who Edward was.

"Wendy and Edward," he said one day. "I'd like to invite you over for dinner."

"That's very nice of you," Mark said. "But—"

"We'd love to," Ruth said.

"Tomorrow night then," the old man said.

"Why did you say yes?" Mark said when they were back inside their house.

"Oh, he just looks so lonely," she said. "And he seems to have gotten paler and skinnier since we last saw him. Having company might help his appetite."

"All right," Mark said. "But there's something about him that gives me the creeps."

They brought over a bottle of wine and dessert. Good thing too, because the old man's idea of dinner was a foul-tasting, watery broth.

"I'll get dessert," Ruth said after they ate, heading toward the kitchen.

"Good," Mark slurred, slumping in his chair. "I could *uze zome*."

Ruth wondered what was wrong with him. He had only had a few sips of the wine. But she felt strangely dizzy too.

She sliced the apple pie and looked for the ice cream in the large freezer. There were some strange-looking large bones inside.

No, it can't be, Ruth thought. *That one looks like a human skull*.

"I'm afraid that's what's left of Wendy and Edward," the old man said, walking in on her. "They were my neighbors before you came along. Only good for soup now."

"Why?" Ruth said, leaning against the counter.

"Man's gotta eat," he said. "I don't know what I would have done if you hadn't accepted by invitation."

"You put something in that broth," she said, sliding down to the floor.

"It's best that way," he said. "I promise you won't feel a thing."

She was already sleeping. The old man began to drool. He put on his apron and thick rubber gloves and began working.

Dead Children's Hospital

"It hurts," the ghostly child cries. "It huuuuurts!"
"Do try to be brave," the nurse says. "It's not that bad."
"But it hurts. Wait. What was that?"
"That's not going to work. Close your eyes and count to ten."
"No, really, I think someone else is here."
"You're right. What do we have here? I think you might have a visitor."
"A visitor! A visitor! I do so love visitors."
[Now turn to someone and, using an evil nurse voice, say:]
"Wait, it's not a visitor, it's **[insert person's name]**. Where have you been? Oh, never mind. You're back just in time for your shot. I promise it will only hurt… while you're alive."
AAAH!

Johnny Wrote a Monster

"I'm gonna win that contest," John Fontaine said.

"No doubt that's a sweet prize," Donald said. "But there are more than 100 kids in the fourth grade. Way more. Those aren't good odds."

"I don't care," John said. "I'm gonna write the scariest story and I'm gonna win that prize."

The new principal had announced earlier that day that each upper grade was having a writing contest. The top story from each class would be read during a special assembly and a group of parents and teachers would vote on first place. First prize was $100.

The theme was horror, but the story wasn't supposed to be gory.

"A minimum of blood and no slasher stuff," the principal had said during morning announcements. "Points will be deducted for gore. Lots of points."

There was a loud moan from a lot of the boys in John's class. But not John. He just wanted to win. If a bloodless story was going to get it done, that was fine by him. Just as long as he won.

John hurried home and started working on his story.

He paced around the room, working out the details out loud.

"Okay, there's this guy and he turns into a monster. He's got fire pouring out of his eyes. And he burns up everyone he sees. No. Too violent.

"Okay, there's this guy and he can make people's heads burst like pumpkins on the pavement just by thinking about it. No, too brainy and bloody. Can't have brain goop flying through the air. That would probably qualify as gore in the judge's eyes.

"Focus, John. Okay, there's a thing that crawls out of a circus tent. It's a cross between a lion and clown. A Clion. No, too stupid.

"Okay, there's a spaceship from another world and in this world the people have two heads, one on each knee and up above their necks there's a piñata. No, no, no."

He let out a long sigh. This was going nowhere. And then he got an idea. A real idea.

"Okay, there's a bloodless ghoul going around sucking the blood out of anyone he comes near. Except there's not a drop of blood in the whole story. Okay, what happens to the blood? It dries up in the atmosphere. No. Okay, it gets sucked into the ghoul. The ghoul's like a black hole and the blood is just gone, leaving behind shriveled-up corpses. So maybe he's a red hole. Yeah, that's it. 'A minimum of blood.' That's it!"

He pumped his fist in the air.

"I'll call it *The Red Hole* or *The Bloodless Ghoul*. Yes, yes, yes! I believe we have our winner."

John paused and looked out at the crowd. They were eating out of his hand like they were zombies and he was feeding them fresh brains. Then he hit them with the big finish.

"James knew there was nothing he could do. The bloodless ghoul closed in, its eyes red and evil. James felt the blood leaving his body, like air leaving a balloon. One drop at a time. James crumbled to the ground, pale and lifeless and dead. Dead, dead, *dead*. The end."

There were some *oohs* followed by wild clapping and cheering.

I've done it, John thought. *I've won*.

But John didn't win. First place went to MacKenzie Dewitt, a girl, for something she called "The Shroud of Farmer Gwynn."

The Shroud of Farmer Gwynn? Who talks like that? What's a shroud anyway? John said as he kicked a can down the sidewalk. That story was so not scary. I was robbed.

“I couldn’t agree more,” a voice suddenly said. “You had my vote.”

John turned and looked around. His eyes just about popped out of his head. Standing there right next to him was the ghoul from his story.

“Hold on now,” it said. “I know what you’re thinking. And you’re wrong. You didn’t create me. I’m not really a bloodless ghoul. Okay, technically I’m somewhat of a bloodless ghoul. At least I’m bloodless. Ghoul is a more difficult term to pin down. If by ghoul you mean demon, I suppose I could loosely be called a bloodless ghoul. In any case, I enjoyed your story. I mean, it wasn’t that scary, but it did give me an idea of what to be for Halloween.”

“But it’s not Ha-Ha-Ha-Halloween,” John stammered.

“I was just taking it out for a test drive. Demons need practice too, you know. But I can tell you right now that I’m not going to stick with that *one drop at a time* business,” the demon said. “I don’t have to play by those rules.”

Then he smiled, holding out his hand and bringing his fingers together in a turning motion.

John felt a strange pressure building inside him.

A moment later all the blood in his body exploded out of him.

The Blue Boy

The lake was supposed to be haunted. Over the years, several people had died there under unexplained circumstances. Some had gone mad.

They said the *L*-shaped body of water was cursed by the ghost of a boy who had drowned while ice fishing more than 50 years earlier. It was early spring when the thin ice had cracked under his feet.

They never found the body.

"Where you headed?" the old man at the general store asked.

"Up to the lake," Mano said, signaling with his chin.

"Dead Boy Lake?"

"Yep."

"Wouldn't advise it," the man said, putting the container of worms into a brown paper bag. "It's haunted, haven't ya heard?"

"As long as it's haunted by fish," Mano said.

"I knew him. Back when he was a boy, I mean. Name was Dave. Nice kid. These days they call him *Blue Boy*. Hear he's not so nice anymore."

Mano nodded and took his worms and his change.

"Watch yourself now," the old man said, lighting a cigarette and squinting out the window.

Half an hour later Mano was sitting in his canoe, casting his line into the water. He had the place to himself.

Mano never had a better day. It was as if the trout had been waiting for him all their lives. They went for the worms like flies on molasses, impaling themselves on the hook. Mano wanted to stop—he had more fish than he could eat in a month—but he couldn't. And neither it seemed could the trout.

So there he sat, casting and reeling, casting and reeling, until his ice chest was overflowing with the flapping fish. Then the breeze started to pick up. And then between the sound of his reel and the wind, Mano thought he heard something else.

"*Save soooome for meeee*," a far off voice called.

Mano paid it no mind. He just kept fishing.

Finally, he decided to call it a day. He sadly placed his rod inside the canoe and paddled back to shore. He loaded the back of the SUV with his silver-scaled treasure and secured the boat to the roof. Then he slid in behind the wheel.

"Hell of a day," Mano said.

"*Hell of a day*," a gurgling voice repeated.

The sound was coming from the passenger seat.

The car was suddenly filled with a smell that made the vomit, green and gooey, come up in Mano's throat. He turned slowly. Sitting there was a small boy, his skin wet and pale blue. At first he began to gasp and cough up water, and then a thick black froth bubbled from his mouth.

The boy turned toward him and Mano saw that he had no eyes—just dark empty holes that disappeared into the back of his skull. He smiled at Mano through yellowish-green, rotting teeth.

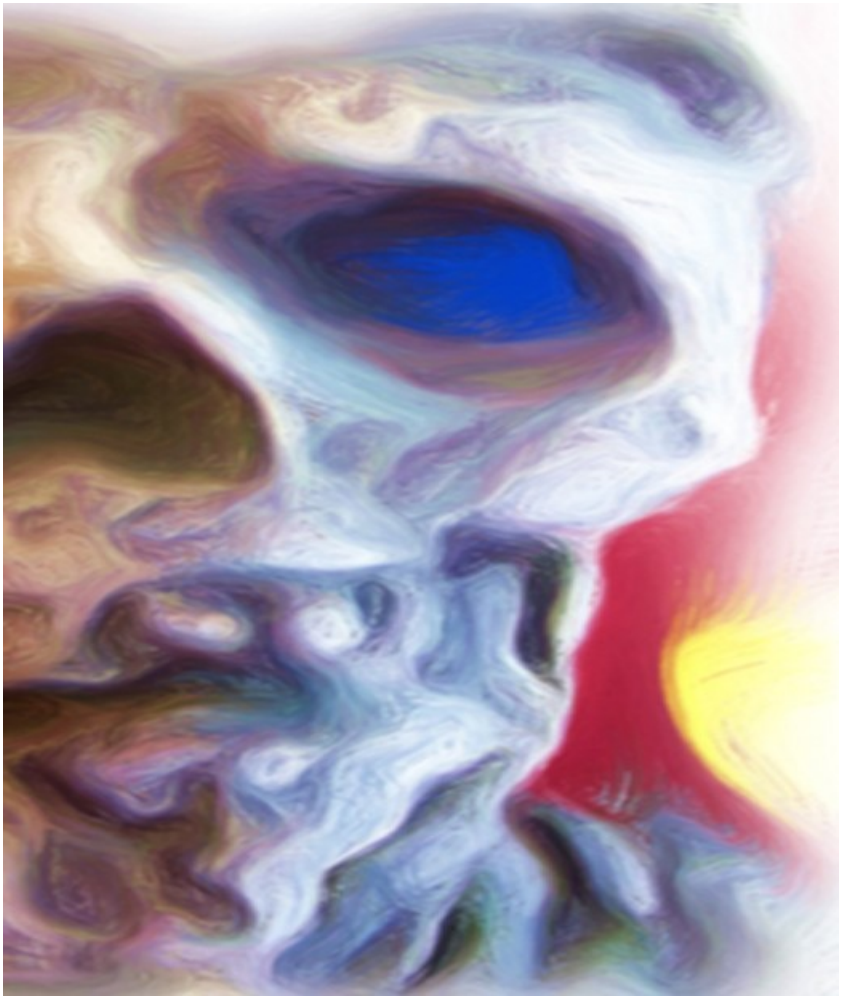
"*Thanks for saving soooome for meeee*," he murmured.

The *Blue Boy* reached out his arms and pulled Mano in.

"*Now, give me sooome*," he whispered.

Then he kissed Mano on the lips. As his world went blue and black, Mano felt his heart stop. And then he felt nothing.

AAAH!



Your Mother's Back

"Ouch."

The faraway, angry voice came from down in the crack on the sidewalk. Larry stopped and turned around.

"What was that?"

"It's true I've been dead for a while now, Larry," the old voice said, sounding closer and angrier. "But *that* still hurts."

"Who's down there?" Larry said, getting scared.

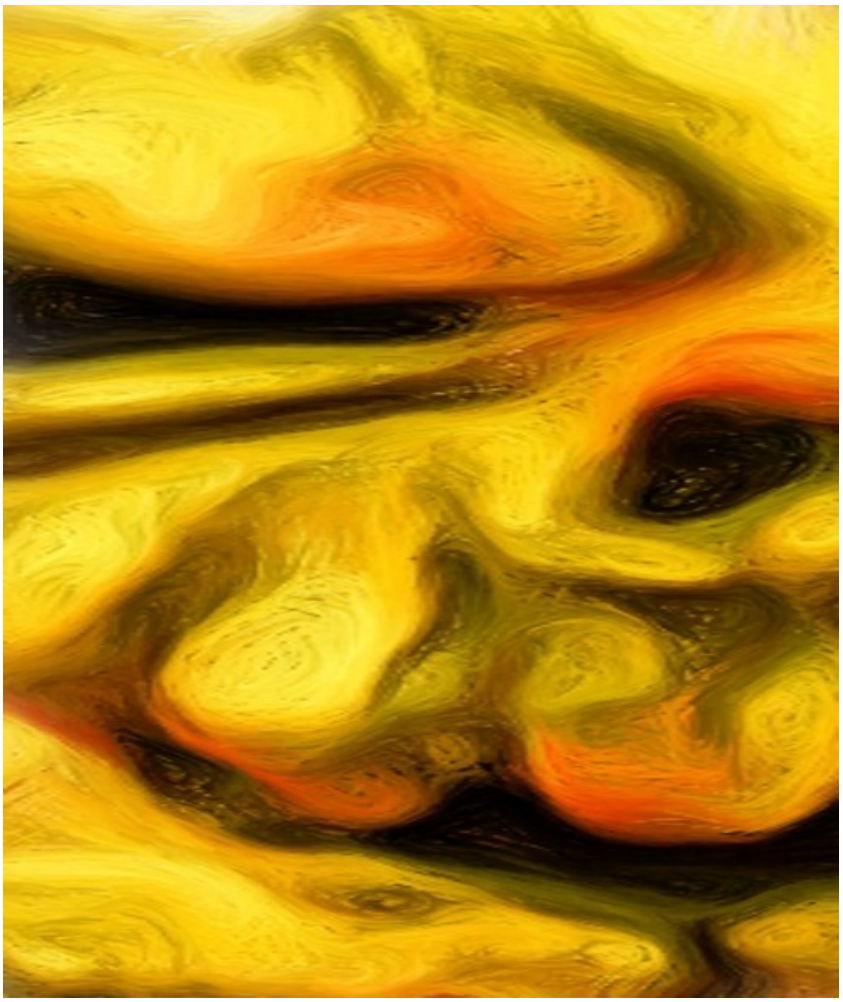
"Why, it's me, Larry."

"I'm sorry," he cried. "I didn't mean it."

Suddenly the ghost of Larry's dead mother shot up out of the crack. She floated in front of his face and stared at him for a moment with hateful, beady eyes. Then she grabbed Larry by the throat. She spun him around and kicked him hard in the spine, like she had been training with Bruce Lee.

Larry heard a crack and felt a terrible bolt of pain and then everything went all Hong Kong Phooey.

"See what I mean, Larry?" the ghost shrieked, hovering over Larry's broken body. "See what I mean?"



The Room at the Top of the Stairs

The room at the top of the stairs never felt right. Janet knew there was something there. Something that didn't want them there. Or maybe it was just the opposite. Something that wanted them there too much. Something that wanted them there for the wrong reasons.

Even her dad, who didn't believe in ghosts or anything remotely paranormal, was spooked by it.

"That would be a perfect place for your office," Janet's mom had said to him when they first moved in to the old house.

But instead he picked a claustrophobic little spare bedroom with no windows. Whenever anyone asked why he wasn't using the brightly lit attic to do his writing, his pride wouldn't allow him to tell the truth—that there was something there that scared him, too. He just made up some excuse.

But Janet knew.

She had only been in the room twice, three years ago when they had just moved in. It was cold in there. Even though it was the middle of summer and the rest of the house was warm. Heat was supposed to rise. It shouldn't have been cold. But it was cold. So cold.

The second and last time she had felt something brush her hair. And then she heard someone whisper her name.

"Janet. *Janet*."

She turned around but no one was there.

She never spoke of it and never went back. She liked the rest of the house just fine. It was a happy place and she felt safe in it. Most of the time she didn't think about the room. Sometimes weeks and months went by without her even remembering it was there.

And then one afternoon in early December Janet found herself alone in the house. The days were growing shorter and shorter. It was just past four and it was already getting dark.

She suddenly heard Boris meowing loudly.

The sounds were coming from upstairs. From up in that room.

And it wasn't a normal meow. It was the kind of freaky meow that told her that something was wrong. The cat was in trouble.

"How did he get in there?" Janet said out loud, the words trembling out her mouth.

As she stood at the foot of the stairs, the cat's howling got louder and more frantic.

Janet climbed the squeaky steps slowly, walked down the short little hall, and paused in front of the door.

The cat was hissing now.

"Damn it," she said.

She turned the door knob. It was dark in the room, the attic facing away from the day's last rays of sunlight. Janet flicked on the light switch but nothing happened.

Bulb must have burned out, she thought.

"Boris," she called, still standing by the door. "Come here, Boris."

The cat's meowing had stopped. It was now as quiet as snow falling on a grave in there. Janet took a few steps toward the center of the room.

"Boris. I'm right here," she said, shivering.

The room was colder than ever. Janet could see her breath escaping out in shallow, uneven bursts.

Suddenly the cat exploded across the dark wood floor, crashed hard into her shin, and flew out into the hall.

Janet turned to leave. And then she heard it again.

"*Hello, Janet*," the voice whispered in her ear. "*I've been waiting for you*."

Then the door slammed shut.

Janet felt it close in all around her. She tried to scream. Instead, laughter—like nails across a chalkboard—filled the room.

When Janet's parents got home they didn't find her. They assumed she went over to a friend's house and forgot to leave a note. When they still hadn't heard from her a few hours later, her mom called Janet's number.

They heard the faint ringing of the phone coming from somewhere in the house. It was coming from upstairs. From up in the attic.

"That's strange," her mother said.

Janet's father raced up the stairs and threw open the door. The phone was in the center of the floor, still ringing and giving off light from its screen.

"Janet, are you in here?" he said. "Janet?"

He scanned the room and saw her. She was huddled in a corner, hugging her knees to her chest.

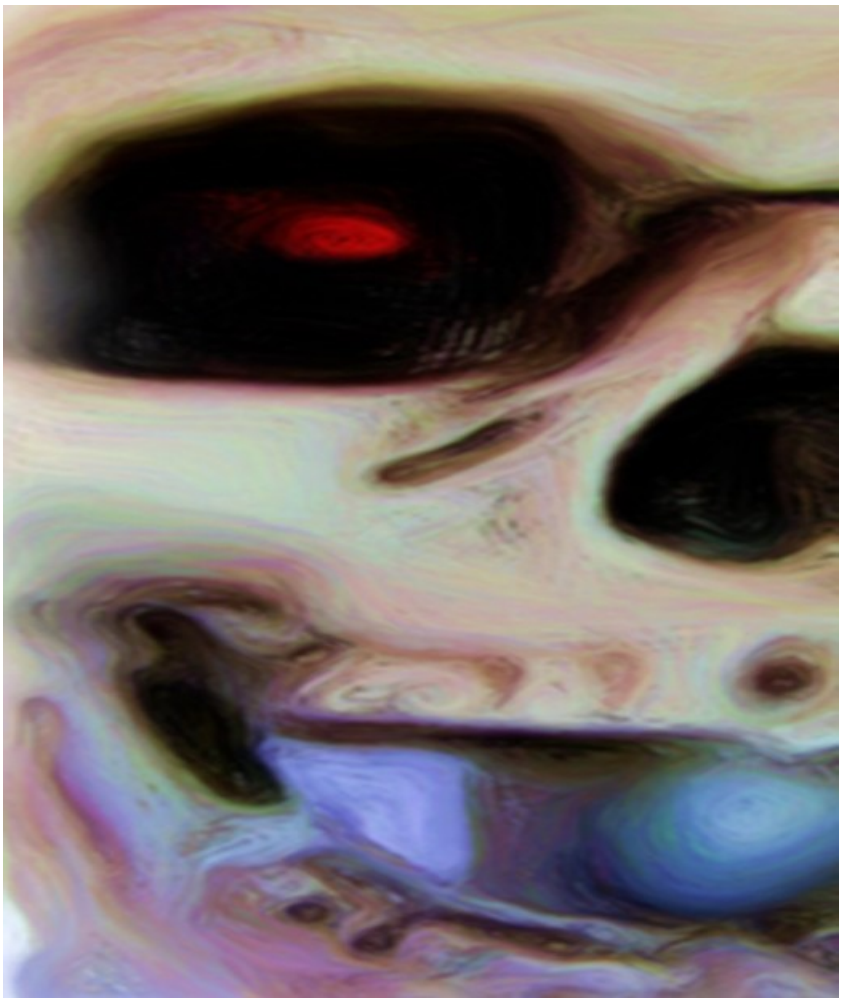
Her father helped her up and walked her outside into the small hall.

When she saw her, her mother screamed and then fainted.

Janet's hair had turned *white as snow*.

Won't Get Ghouled Again

Aaaaaaaaaaaah!!!



Cookies

February 9…

It is a beautiful late February day that whispers of spring and all the things that spring brings. An almost warm breeze blows down the street.

Not much longer now, I tell myself. The snow will soon be gone.

"Excuse us, Mister?" a small voice suddenly says from behind me.

At first I ignore it. No one has ever called me mister.

"Mister?"

I stop and turn around.

There are two little girls standing there. They carry a large cardboard box that is almost bigger than they are.

"What's in the box?" I say.

"Cookies," one says. "Would you like some?"

"No, thanks," I start to say.

And then, why not? I think. I love cookies.

"Yes," I say. "Yes, I would."

I end up buying five boxes.

They are delicious.

February 12…

I am sick. Terribly sick. Something wrong with my stomach. It pours out of me from both ends. Ever since the cookies.

Thinking back, there was something strange about those girls. Shouldn't they have been wearing uniforms? And the way they smiled after they handed me those boxes. There was something not quite right in those smiles. Sinister. Almost evil.

I don't even think I paid them.

It had to be something in the cookies. I can't think of what else it could be.

I will go to the doctor if I don't improve soon.

February 13…

Terrible sounds explode out of me. Sometimes it sounds… like words.

"Too late for you. Warn the others!"

Looking at these words I can only conclude I have a raging fever and am out of my mind.

Strange then how my cheek is cold to the touch. Ice cold.

February 15…

I feel better. Much better.

It's rainy and cold but I don't care. I almost feel back to my old self.

The muddy, foul river that poured out of me has finally dried up. I am still weak, but that will pass. For the first time in days, I am hungry.

February 16…

There is a knock at the door. I look through the peephole and see the little cookie girls standing there. When I open the door, Roland is there alone. I stick my head out and look up and down the hall. Empty.

"Where'd they go?" I say.

"Where'd who go?" he says.

"Oh, never mind."

"Ready?"

"Ready for what?"

"C'mon, man. You're the one who called me and asked if I wanted to play some handball."

Handball? I don't remember calling him or saying anything about handball.

"Sorry. I must still be weak, man," I say. "I'm gonna have to pass."

"Whatever," he says, walking away.

A minute later there is another knock.

Roland is back.

"Ready?" he says.

"Didn't we just go over this?" I say.

"Go over what? What are you talking about?"

He is serious.

"Forget it," I say. "What's up?"

"Handball? You asked if I wanted to play."

Something is going on. Something weird.

February 16…

I see the little girls in a dream. They smile again the way they had that day. That's all. But something about them fills me with dread. A dread that stays with me the rest of the sleepless night.

February 17…

I finally go back to school today. I get there early. I sit in the empty classroom for a long time, wondering where everyone is. And then I realize it's Sunday.

February 20…

"Hey, why did you push Nate into the street?" Roland asks. "If that car hadn't stopped—"

"What are you talking about?"

He tells me. Reminds me, looking at me the whole time like I am crazy. Apparently I shoved Nate into the street yesterday during cross country. We were just returning to campus after a 10-miler. I don't know why I would do that.

"You had a terrible expression on your face," Roland says. "And then it was like you weren't even there."

I've never had a problem with Nate. But I don't know why Roland would lie about it either. I believe him, and yet… I have no recollection of any of it.

I can only conclude that the illness is not through with me. It's moved up, leaving my bowels and affecting, infecting my brain.

I start to sweat.

This isn't just a little lapse in memory. I'm starting to become dangerous.

Am I going mad? Maybe it wasn't the cookies. Maybe it was bad meat. I promise that if this goes any further, I will tell someone and have them put me somewhere. Somewhere where I can't hurt anyone.

February 21…

My only hope is to find those girls. I am convinced of it. They must have an antidote. They must.

February 23…

I see the little girls again tonight. They are in the corner by the closet. They are eating something. Not cookies. Blood is running down their chins. They giggle.

The room is completely dark. And yet I see them. I turn on the light and there, of course, is nothing there. I stay up the rest of the night, afraid they will return, wondering what they were eating.

They do not come back.

February 24…

I wake up from a dream as if I had stepped out of the shower. Everything is wet. I remember nothing, no details, just the words.

"Warn them! Warn them!"

February 26…

I find myself staring out the window, looking down at the students walking by. There is a twisted smile on my lips and a freshly carved jack-o-lantern in one hand and a long sharp knife in the other. I have never seen either before and do not know where they came from and what I am doing. Where a pumpkin in February came from I don't know. Nor can I tell you the thoughts behind that smile.

I am going mad. There is no other explanation. And it is not a flowers and pastel pleasant kind of madness. It is dark and dangerous. And I feel there is no coming back from it.

February 27…

I will try one thing and then I will turn myself in.

I am convinced that those girls are the cause of it all. I must find them. They are the key. Maybe I am wrong. Maybe there is still hope for me. Perhaps they know of a cure and even possess an antidote.

Yes, I will find them and everything will be better.

February 28…

I walk all the streets of this small town at least four times each. There is no sign of them.

There is no hope.

I feel the sickness growing inside me. Taking me over.

Tomorrow I will go to the hospital.

February 31… (I know that where you are there is no such date as February 31. But I no longer inhabit the place where you are.)

I have found them. I have found them! Or rather they have found me. It doesn't matter.

They are here and everything will be all right now.

I walk up to them and ask them.

"What was in those cookies?"

"Everything," the one says.

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Everything is everything," she repeats.

"Everything awful, everything horrible, everything sick. All the vile things," the other one says. "They were all in there."

"But why?"

"Because it's what we do," the first one says. "Don't you have things you do?"

I ignore the question.

"Is there a cure?" I ask. "There must be a cure."

"Not really," the second one says. "Except for—"

She smiles at me and then at the other one and then they both smile at me. They bare their sharp fangs. They lunge toward me. I push them away but they rip off my left arm. They laugh. I can somehow feel the pain in my forearm as I watch them pull at the flesh with their teeth.

I stagger behind the bed, the blood leaving me. At least I know I have not imagined them. My heart pumps weakly, faintly, for the last few times and is comforted by the thought that they are real. At least that much is true. I have been forgetful and thought and done evil things, but they are the cause of it and they are real.

I can barely feel my pulse now. I can barely hold the pen I'm writing these words with. I hear them coming. I hear their heinous, girlish giggles. They are coming to finish me off. They'll come for you next.

Don't eat the cookies.

Whatever you do, don't eat the cookies. Do you hear me?

DON'T EAT THE COOKIES!

Shell Shock

"What's that?" Sally said.

"Probably just the icemaker," Brittney said. "It's been running a little loud lately."

Sally walked to the refrigerator. Another explosion rocked the kitchen. She opened the freezer.

"There aren't even any cubes in here," she said.

The next jolt almost knocked her down.

"It seems to be coming from down in the main compartment."

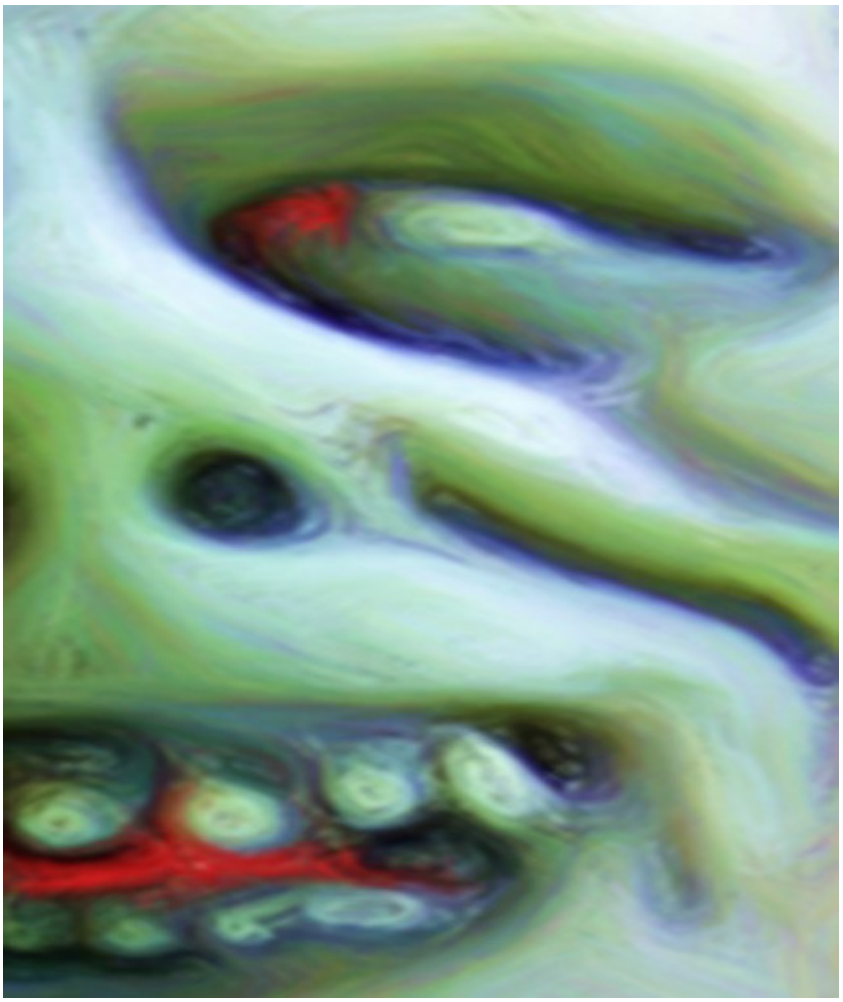
"Wait for me," Brittney said.

She rushed to the kitchen.

Sally opened the refrigerator door.

There were cracked egg shells everywhere. And there were things inside, live things, horrible things, things that weren't baby chicks, things that didn't resemble anything they had ever seen… things that came after them.

Things that cracked some skulls and made an omelet out of Sally's and Brittney's brains.



The Head of Teddy Ballgame

Josh, Jon, and John were sitting around the clubhouse playing video games and drinking beer.

"You know when the season's over, we should go on a road trip to the desert and break out Teddy Ballgame," Josh said.

"Well, the way we've been pitching that should be sooner rather than later," Jon said. "I doubt we'll make the playoffs."

Outside the crowd booed as the team lost yet another game.

"Pass me that bucket of chicken," John said, belching.

Jon was right. The team blew a nine-game lead in the final month of the season and failed to qualify for the postseason.

A week after the season ended, the three pitchers were far away from sad, chilly Boston, playing round after round of golf under the Arizona sun and sitting around the pool.

"You ready for tomorrow night?" Jon said. "The security guard will be expecting us."

"I reckon so," Josh said. "How much is this going to cost us anyway?"

"A couple of tickets behind the first base dugout to a game next season and an all-expenses weekend trip to Beantown."

"This one's on me," John said, smiling. "After all, I made 16.5 million dead presidents last year."

"You pitch like a dead president," Josh said. "Hey, wasn't your ERA 16.5?"

"Takes one to know one," John said. "Anyway, I'll be that one you see crying… all the way to the bank."

"All right, all right," Jon said. "Tomorrow night we set Teddy Ballgame free."

Teddy Ballgame had been one of the most famous players in team history and one of the greatest hitters in the history of baseball. When he died his family had his head frozen in hopes that he could be brought back to life one day. But according to his oldest daughter, this went against his wishes. She said Teddy Ballgame just wanted to be cremated and his ashes scattered at sea.

"I'm playing an old video loop for the cameras," the security guard said. "But after 10 minutes I've got to go back to the live feed, so set your watches and don't be late. Oh, and you're looking for the container marked *A-1949*. *A-1949*. Got it?"

"*A-1949*. Got it," Jon said. "Thanks, buddy."

"It's wicked cold in *hee-ah*," Josh said a minute later. "Wait a minute. Why am I talking that way? I'm from Texas."

The three looked around the room. There were a few large containers that housed whole bodies. Mostly, though, it was heads. There seemed to be more than 100 corpses in all.

"Why just the heads?" John asked.

"This stuff is expensive," Jon said. "I guess most of these folks figured they'd freeze their most important part—their brains."

"I guess they won't be preserving *your* brain," Josh said, turning toward John. "Or your right arm."

"Shut up," John said.

“Man, that’s so wrong,” Josh said. “They’ve got his head in a lobster pot.”

John started laughing.

“Keep it down, you idiots,” Jon said.

“Look,” Josh said a few minutes later. “Here it is.”

They removed the lid from the silver canister.

John stared down at the head.

“Are you sure that’s him,” he said. “That doesn’t look like Teddy Ballgame.”

“It’s the number the guard gave us,” Jon said.

“Well, he has been dead for a while now,” Josh said. “Plus he’s frozen. I’d expect he would look a little different.”

“All right,” Jon said. “Josh, you hold the container and I’ll lift him out. John, you hold open the bowling ball bag.”

“Okay, but move it along,” John said. “We’re running out of time.”

Jon lifted the head carefully out of the container.

“We’re here to take you home, Teddy,” Josh whispered.

Suddenly the head flew out of Jon’s hands. It floated and hovered in midair and slowly opened its eyes.

“I’m not going anywhere,” the head said.

“But we came to rescue y-y-y-you,” Jon said.

“There’s nothing I’d like more than to feel myself drifting down to the Caribbean on those warm waters,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said. “But what you boys did wasn’t right. Somewhere along the line you stopped caring. You stopped caring about the game. And from where I float, that’s a mortal sin.”

“This is nuts!” John shouting, his eyes bulging like cheeky wads of tobacco.

“I’m not the only Sox fan in here either,” the head said. “We’re gonna teach you a lesson you won’t soon forget. Get ‘em, boys.”

The lids popped off a few of the other containers. Before they knew what was happening, the three ballplayers were surrounded by several frozen bodies and floating, angry heads.

“No!” Josh screamed. “Nooo!”

“This can’t be happening,” Jon yelled.

“We’re sorry,” John whimpered, a puddle spreading down at his feet. “We’re so sorry.”

A few minutes later they found themselves inside one of the large canisters. The frozen liquid nitrogen closed in all around.

They were colder than any of them had ever been in their entire lives. John’s lips turned purple. Josh’s eyeballs froze. Jon’s brain cracked and popped.

“Three hundred and twenty-one degrees below zero is no laughing matter,” the head of Teddy Ballgame said, chuckling. “Oh, wait, maybe it is.”

“Hahahahahahahahaa,” the other frozen bodies and angry heads laughed. “Ahahahahahahahaa!”

“Maybe it is.”

Smiles All Around

The house stood on the edge of town. No one had lived in it for a long time. Not since that October night in 1964 when the stepmother visited the children one by one in their rooms.

They must have known something was wrong by the way she smiled. After all, she never smiled.

The neighbors said they didn't hear any screams. But there must have been screams. How could there not have been screams? *How on earth could there not have been screams?*

AAAH!

Better.

AAAH!

AAAH!

Much better.

AAAH!

Yes. Oh, Yes.

The Voice Inside

The voice had always been there inside her head for as long as Sarah could remember.

At first she worried that there was something wrong with her. But she soon realized that everyone had that voice inside them. It was that little devil that sat on your shoulder, counseling you to do bad things. They even made cartoons about it. Except that Sarah didn't have an angel sitting on the other shoulder. It was always just her own small voice she heard telling her to do the right thing.

But as Sarah got older, the voice of evil inside her head—which had started out as a very faint whisper—grew louder.

"Rip the head off your brother's G.I. Joe. Boys shouldn't play with dolls anyway."

"Pull that girl's hair. You know you want to."

"Lie to your mother. She doesn't need to know."

"Skip school today. Believe me, you won't miss a thing."

"Shoot that grizzly bear! *Shoot it*."

Sarah did a good job of ignoring the voice, but it was getting harder and harder.

She began talking to herself. At first it was when no one was around. But then it started happening all the time: during dinner, in class, with her friends.

"No, I won't do that!"

"I'm not going to say that."

"Leave me alone! Leave me alone!"

By the time she was in high school, Sarah had lost all her friends. They all thought she was just too weird. And not in a funny or cool way either. There seemed to be something seriously wrong with her.

Sarah's parents took her to a psychologist, but it didn't help. She refused to talk to him.

"Go ahead and bare your feelings, Sarah," the voice said, chuckling. "I doubt it will do any good."

"Stop laughing at me!"

Soon Sarah became deaf to anything that wasn't the voice. She couldn't hear birds chirping or music playing or people talking. And then one day, she couldn't even hear herself. Sarah didn't hear a sound when her spirit finally shattered into a million pieces

"Do I have your attention now?" the voice screamed. "Good. Mmmm... Good."

Sarah could only cry and nod her head.

"All right, here's the plan. You're going to run for president. Do you hear me, Sarah, PRESIDENT!"

The voice started laughing. It laughed and laughed and laughed. It sounded like a chorus of toilets flushing and choking and overflowing until the whole world was standing ankle deep in it.

"And then you're going to marry Tom Cruise."

Sarah kept crying. The voice kept laughing.

"Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha, ha…"

The Falcon

Carlos Deulofeu was one of the fastest players in the history of Argentine soccer. His nickname was *El Halcón*—the falcon—the fastest of all animals, almost three times faster than a cheetah. When he was in his prime, opponents claimed that all they saw was a blur when Deulofeu flew past them.

But lately Deulofeu had lost a step or two. He never had great ball skills—never needed them. And now, with his legendary speed all but gone, he was rapidly becoming just another player.

It hurt to hear the fans chant their insults.

Old age burns and stings.
El halcón now sits in his birdcage and of yesterday sings.
Halcón, halcón, they have cut off your wings.

But what troubled Deulofeu even more was the fear that the coach was going replace him. He always knew he would have to retire one day. He just wasn't ready for that day to come so soon.

"I would do anything for one more season in the sun," he said, icing down his aching knee after another bad game. "Hell, I would do anything for one more game."

"If you are serious about doing anything," Gaston, the trainer, whispered, "I know someone who might be able to help you."

"I am," Deulofeu said.

The next night the trainer took Deulofeu to meet an old man.

"You must do whatever this *brujo* says," Gaston said. "He is a witch with great powers. I have told him of your situation and he has prepared a cure."

"*Esta bien*," Deulofeu said. "I will do it."

The old man didn't look like he had any special powers. He just looked like an old man.

There was a strange smell in the dark little room.

The *brujo* signaled for Deulofeu to sit down at a small table. Then he left the room and came back with a bowl. He placed it down in front of Deulofeu.

"Eat all of this," he said. "Leave only the bones, *solo los huesos*."

Deulofeu realized that this soup had been the cause of the odd smell.

"What is this?" he asked.

"Eat," was all the old man said.

Deulofeu pulled the tender meat off the tiny bones and chewed on it, slurping up the clear broth.

"I've had worse," he said when he was finished.

"You will now be fast again. But only three times each day. *No más*," the brujo said. "This thing is most important."

"Yeah, okay," Deulofeu said. "What was that I just ate?"

"The feet of a newborn," the old man said.

"A newborn what?"

"A human child."

"You must be joking," Deulofeu said, seeing that the old man did not seem to be joking.

El Halcón spent the entire night throwing up and in the morning he didn't feel any faster.

"You'll pay for this," he said, shaking his fist at the trainer. "That *brujería* of yours was a waste of time."

"*Paciencia*," Gaston said. "Patience."

The first time it happened, Deulofeu wasn't even fully aware.

It didn't feel like he was going that fast. But he effortlessly blew by defenders a couple of times during practice. He couldn't remember the last time that had happened.

"What do you know?" he said, smiling.

He couldn't remember the last time he had done that either.

During the game Sunday, Deulofeu used his new power twice during the first half. The first time he ran too fast. He outran the ball, failing to push it hard enough out in front of him. But the second time was different.

He took the ball with him, blazing like a comet across the field. He was faster than he had ever been.

"¡Halcón! ¡Halcón!" the crowd shouted when he scored.

In the second half he repeated the move, but he was too fast for the linesman's eyes. He called him offside.

With less than a minute to go, the game was still tied 1-1.

A teammate stole the ball and passed it to Deulofeu in the dying seconds.

"¡Halcón! ¡Halcón!" the crowd cheered.

"Again!" Deulofeu called down to his legs. "Again!"

He tore through the other team's defense like it was tissue paper. There was only the goalkeeper to beat and he guessed wrong. Deulofeu's feet softly cradled the ball like a baby into the back of the empty net.

The stadium erupted in hysteria.

Goal! *¡Goooooooool!*

As the other players ran toward him to celebrate, Deulofeu felt strange. There was something wrong with his feet.

"*Mis pobres pies*," he shouted. "My poor feet!"

Deulofeu exploded past them toward the locker room. In all the cheering, they didn't hear his screams.

It wasn't until they reached the locker room that they heard him.

The screams were coming from the shower.

"*Mis pobres pies*," he yelled. "My poor feet!"

They rushed toward him, a sick burning smell hitting their nostrils when they reached the shower room.

"*Mis pobres pies*," the screams echoed. "My poor feet!"

The water was still on, but Deulofeu wasn't there.

All they found was a pile of wet ashes on the tiles near one of the drains.

The screams were still bouncing off the walls.

"*Mis pobres pies*. My poor feet!"

Carlos Deulofeu was never seen again.

Jail Break

"How long have you been here?" Edward asked.

"I can't even remember," Jerry groaned.

"Twelve years for me next April," Myron said.

"Seven here," Edward said.

"I moved in last week, but each day feels like a year," Phil said. "I don't know how you fellas do it."

"You'll get used to that," Myron said. "It helps if you have a hobby. I'm a crossword puzzle man myself."

"Don't you ever wonder about the changes?" Edward asked. "I mean flying cars, things like that."

"They're never gonna have flying cars," Myron said. "That's just sci-fi nonsense is all that is."

"Well, as of six days ago anyway, I can tell you there were no flying cars. You can rest assured of that," Phil said.

"I don't care about the new stuff. I just want some old joy," Jerry said. "Pizza. Beer. The ladies."

"They still had those six days ago, rookie?" Edward said.

"Yeah, they still had those," Phil sighed.

"That's good enough for me," Jerry said. "I say we make a break for it."

"Don't we have to wait for something to happen, like a plague or at least some weird chemicals to seep down in the soil?" Phil asked.

"Aw, that's just movie stuff," Jerry said. "I'm done waiting. Who's with me?"

"Field trip?" Myron said.

"Field trip," Jerry said.

"Field trip," they all said together.

"Okay, on three," Jerry said. "One, two, three."

They started pushing. And they started groaning. And they started huffing. And they started puffing. They pushed and groaned and huffed and puffed.

"Man, I've really let myself go," Edward said.

"My back's gonna let me hear about this in the morning," Myron said.

"Yeah, I don't know about this," Phil said.

"Eyes on the prize, gentlemen," Jerry said. "Eyes on the prize. Pace yourselves."

Several hours later, Jerry made it to the surface. He waited for his friends, looking up at the full moon.

One by one the others poked out a hand, a head, a torso, until they were all out. They sat there for a while, surrounded by the gray, stone markers and dead flowers, breathing hard.

"First thing I'm doing is going after the cheap bastard that bought me that little tombstone," Jerry said. "Okay, second thing. First thing is pizza."

"Pizza," the others repeated. "Pizza."

They got up, dusted the dirt off, and started shuffling toward town.

Old Relic Head

A small package arrived in the mailbox.

"Look," Mary said. "It's from your brother."

Jerome hadn't heard from his brother in a long time. He was an archeologist and had disappeared at a ruin somewhere in Thailand more than 10 years earlier.

"I thought he was dead," Jerome said.

"He might still be," Mary whispered. "The postmark is stamped *1998*."

The package had been mailed at the end of the last century.

Jerome drove them home and pulled the car into the garage. He sat behind the wheel, holding the package.

"I'll be right in," he said, waiting for his wife to go inside the house.

Then he slowly tore the brown paper wrapping and removed the tiny lid.

Inside was a small head chiseled out of stone. There was no letter. No note.

"Hmmm," Jerome said, turning the Ping Pong ball-sized head between his fingers.

It looked ancient, the work of a very primitive culture.

Jerome went in the house and placed the relic on a bookshelf near his desk. The days passed and he forgot about it.

But the head did not forget about Jerome. It watched him. And it waited.

And then one night it stopped waiting.

As Jerome stared up at the ceiling from the uncomfortably soft bed, the strange golden-haired woman called "Meh-ree" sleeping next to him, the words formed in his mind.

Must make sacrifice.

His tongue struggled to speak and when the words finally came out they were in a language he did not understand.

"Must… ma… make… sa-cri-fice," he whispered, the strange sounds thick in his throat. "Human sa-cri-fice."

A few minutes later, Jerome made his first offering.

But that would just be the beginning.

The blood still warm in his chin and hands, Jerome looked out the living room window at all the other structures filled with people.

He smiled.

And opened the front door.

Sweatshirt

Devin had lived in the woods for the last 10 years. He would drive almost 200 miles to the nearest town once a month for supplies. That was pretty much the only time he saw other people. He liked it that way, except that sometimes it did get a little lonely.

He was never good at conversation, even when he lived in a big city. He could never think of what to say at the time. Later, when he was by himself, the ideas would come to him. But by then it was too late.

One day Devin wrote an email to a company that had sent him the wrong size sweatshirt.

A friendly response came back an hour later, apologizing and stating that the company would send him the correct size right away.

The email was signed by someone named *Lynn*.

Devin wrote back to thank her for her prompt and kind response.

His monthly trip into town was coming up in three days and he held out little hope that the sweatshirt would be at the post office that soon. Living the way he did, Devin had learned to be patient about such things. But when he went to pick up his mail, the package was waiting for him.

When he got home, Devin emailed the company to thank them again.

Lynn back wrote a few minutes later: "Our pleasure. Hope it's a good fit this time."

It was.

About a week later, Lynn wrote back to ask how the sweatshirt had worked out.

"Fine," Devin wrote. "This one's a keeper."

Over the next few months, the two wrote to each other regularly.

Their correspondence was so effortless and so natural and Devin started to like Lynn more and more. Once they sent each other photos of themselves. Devin spent a whole day taking self-portraits, trying to get it just right.

About a year after they had first started writing, Devin finally asked Lynn out on a date.

"Yes," she wrote back.

Devin drove the 1,000 miles to the big city where Lynn lived the next day. The long drive gave him plenty of time to go over and rehearse the things he would talk about. He was so excited, he barely got any sleep that night.

The next day was Sunday. They had agreed to meet for lunch and then go to the zoo.

Devin drove over to her house. When he got there he double-checked the street number and triple-checked his hair.

He walked up the walkway and rang the bell.

A sad looking woman dressed in black answered the door.

"Hello," Devin said. "Is Lynn home?"

The woman stared at Devin for a moment and started crying. Then she closed the door.

A minute later a man came out.

He told Devin that Lynn had been killed by a man she met on the internet.

"I can't believe it. There must be some mistake," Devin said. "When… when did this happen?"

The man fought back tears and said, "It was a year ago today."

Waiting for the Bus

James was alone in his hotel room.

It had been a long day. Life on the road was hard. He could barely remember what town he was in.

He stretched out on the bed and reached for the TV remote. He was pretty sure the football game was still on. But before he could switch it on, he heard a noise. It sounded like a child crying. And it sounded like it was right under the bed.

"Must be coming from downstairs," James mumbled.

But the cries got louder. Like they were coming from inside the room.

The smell of death filled the air and James suddenly felt like he wasn't alone on the bed. He rolled over and saw it. There was a baby next to him on the bed!

James stared at it in horror. What was going on here?

The baby's diaper looked like it was going to explode. "Jimmie" was written on his little shirt. There was something familiar about its face. Though James couldn't exactly place it, he felt like he had seen the baby before.

The baby kept crying.

"Can't you do something?" an old voice said from across the room. "I'm trying to sleep here."

James turned and saw that there was now an old man sitting on the chair by the window.

"What? Who are you?"

The old man got up out of the chair. He started shuffling toward the bed.

There was something familiar about him, too.

"You're in the wrong room, old man," James said, staring at his face. "Is this your grandson or something?"

"Not exactly," the old man said. "Not exactly."

"Maybe *I'm* in the wrong room," James said. "Maybe this is just a nightmar—"

Suddenly something clicked in his brain and James knew.

The pictures he had seen of himself as a baby. It was the same face. The crying baby on the bed was him. *He* was the baby.

And just as James knew that to be a fact, he was also certain about the old man. He was the old man, too. Or the old man was him. He was looking at his future and his past.

"Yeah," James said to himself. "I must be dreaming."

But when he woke up in the morning, he realized it wasn't a dream. He left his car in the parking lot—it was too small for all of them—and walked to the bus stop.

They stood there waiting. All of them. Almost 20 in all. James. The baby, Jimmie. The old man, Jim. A five-year-old James in a little plaid shirt. A middle aged James with gray hair. A high school James with terrible acne. And assorted others. There was even a fetus James from before he was born, the long umbilical cord dragging behind it on the sidewalk.

And there was a corpse James, the rotting flesh dropping from him.

They all stood there waiting for the bus.

Four-Part Disharmony

Cast of Characters

Dr. Klulaise…a psychiatrist, late forties
Mason Jahr…a mental patient, 13
Mr. Rains, Fitch, Solomon…different personalities inside Mason's mind

TIME: night

SETTING: Dr. Klulaise's office inside a mental hospital for the criminally insane.

ACT ONE (the last act)

SCENE 1 (the last scene)

(Mason Jahr enters the room and sits down on the sofa across from where Dr. Klulaise is sitting.)

DR. KLULAISE

Hello, Mason.

MASON

Hello, Doctor.

DR. KLULAISE

Mason, I'd like to begin today with what happened that day. In the park. I think you're ready.

MASON

What day is that, doctor?

DR. KLULAISE

The day you lost your temper. The day you hurt that boy. Can you tell me about it? Mason?

MR. RAINS

Mason's not here right now. I think he's playing on the swing.

DR. KLULAISE

Is that you, Mr. Rains?

MR. RAINS

Yes, it's me, Doctor K.

DR. KLULAISE

Can you tell me about that day, Mr. Rains?

MR. RAINS

You know I would if I could but I wasn't there.

DR. KLULAISE

Who was there, Mr. Rains?

MR. RAINS

Well, I would guess that Mason was there. He would almost have to be. Have you tried asking that bully?

DR. KLULAISE

I'm afraid he's lost the ability to speak.

MR. RAINS

Not much more than a vegetable, eh? Oh, dear. How unfortunate. Though from what I hear, he did have it coming to him. What about the others?

DR. KLULAISE

What do you hear, Mr. Rains? By *the others* do you mean Fitch and Solomon?

MR. RAINS

Yes, they would be the ones.

DR. KLULAISE

Can I speak to them?

MASON

I don't think this is a good idea. We're not ready yet, doctor. I'm starting to get a bad feeling about this. A real bad feeling.

DR. KLULAISE

Mason, is that you again?

FITCH

Hello, Dr. Klulaise.

DR. KLULAISE

Fitch, how have you been?

FITCH

Well, you know. Just biding my time. One of many. Take a number. Wait your turn. That sort of thing.

DR. KLULAISE

Fitch, what happened that day in the park? On the slide. With that boy.

FITCH

I'm sure I don't know what you're talking about.

DR. KLULAISE

Weren't you there?

FITCH

It was my nap time. I never miss it. It's the only time I'm really free. Away from all these others. Have you talked to Solomon about it?

DR. KLULAISE

No, but I'd like to. Is he there?

FITCH

Solomon? You about?

SOLOMON

Yes, yes. What is it?

DR. KLULAISE

It's Dr. Klulaise, Solomon. How are you?

SOLOMON

No small talk, doc. Get to the point. I'd like to the get back to my, um, inner thought.

DR. KLULAISE

Don't you mean inner *thoughts*?

SOLOMON

I only have one. You know that, doc.

DR. KLULAISE

All right. Solomon, what happened that day on the slide in the park? Why did Mason attack that other child?

SOLOMON

Well, that boy had been picking on Mason something awful. I merely suggested he give him a taste of his own medicine. I don't think he liked it. The taste of his own medicine, I mean. I suspect it tasted quite nasty. His brain juices running down his ears and nose and all.

DR. KLULAISE

Couldn't you have suggested a less violent solution?

SOLOMON

It's not in my nature. You know, like in *The Lady from Shanghai*, doc.

DR. KLULAISE

I haven't seen that one.

SOLOMON

Oh, it's a good one, doc. They don't make them like that anymore. I suppose it wasn't in Mason's nature either.

DR. KLULAISE

May I speak to Mason?

SOLOMON

Be careful what you ask for, doc. Be very careful.

MR. RAINS
(whispering)

Your timing is not the best, Doctor K. Mason's getting that look again.

DR. KLULAISE

Mr. Rains? Where did Solomon go? What look is that?

MR. RAINS

Solomon likes to come and go. You should know that by now, Doctor K. He would say it's in his nature.

(Dr. Klulaise writes something down in his journal. When he looks up, Mason is standing a few feet away.)

DR. KLULAISE

Please sit down, Mr. Rains.

MASON

Mr. Rains had to go. He was never here actually. Neither was Fitch. Neither was Solomon. There are no others, doctor. There's only me. There was always only me. See what I mean?

(Mason moves closer toward Dr. Klulaise with a terrible expression on his face.)

DR. KLULAISE

Please sit down, Mason.

MASON

I don't think so, doctor. I suppose if you want to treat yourself to one last consolation you can tell yourself that you cured me. Now it's your turn. Time for *your* medicine, doctor.

SOLOMON

Yes, time for your medicine, doc. Open wide and say, "Aaah!"

DR. KLULAISE
(screaming)

No! No! Noooo!

(Mason pounds Dr. Klulaise's head into the tile floor until he stops screaming. He then kneels over the dead body and smiles. They all smile.)

Patience

Every night at midnight the head comes down the chimney. It rolls toward the front door and waits.

It waits and waits and waits.

And waits some more.

It waits for you.

Bwahahahahahahahaa…

AAAH!

Waning Carter

The waning crescent moon weakly lit the bedroom as Carter snored loudly under the covers.

A cold breeze blew in through an open window. And then a shadow passed over Carter's head.

"Hello, Carter," a voice whispered.

Carter sat up in bed and looked around. There was nothing there.

He turned on the light.

"I was hoping you'd do that," the voice said. "The darkness kills me. It's light that keeps me alive."

Carter saw an outline, inky and large, coming toward him.

"Who are you?" he said.

"I am your shadow."

Carter began to tremble and grow pale.

"Easy there, Carter. I don't mean you any harm. After all, without you I'm nothing."

The shadow left the room. Carter heard some noises in the kitchen. A minute later it was back.

"I brought you some cookies and warm milk to help you get back to sleep."

Carter felt better. Much better. He smiled.

The shadow smiled, too. Carter was stupid enough to believe anything. This was going to be easy. Easy as taking candy from a baby. (What's a baby doing with candy anyway?) Easy as pie. (The eating, not the baking.) Easy as holding a pillow. (Over someone's head while they sleep.)

Carter stretched and yawned.

"Goodnight, room. Goodnight, moon. Goodnight, shadow."

"Goodnight, Carter. Goodnight. *And good-bye*."

"Mmmmm…"

Bear and Grin It

A deep line formed between Emily's eyes as she squinted down at a pile of bear scat while her dad explained how a lot could be learned by studying an animal's fecal matter.

"Look there," he poked and pointed with a branch. "You see what's left of those pine nuts?"

Suddenly Emily heard a terrible growl. She spun around and saw a huge brown bear running down the trail toward her. Her dad had disappeared and the forest was purple, cold, and dark. Somehow, though, she could see the bear perfectly. Its glowing, crazed eyes closed in, no more than 20 feet away now.

A split second later, as the grizzly towered over her, Emily raised her arms over her head. The bear let fly a deafening roar. It was so close she could smell its awful, rotting fish breath as it swung its head from side to side, drool dangling from its mouth.

The claws came toward her like lightning. She felt them rip into the side of her face as she flew through the air from the force of the blow. Everything turned warm and red. The bear closed in again. Coming closer. Closer…

And then in the final moments of her short life, Emily realized that it wasn't a bear after all. It was something worse. Something so much wor—

"Aaah!"

She woke with a scream, sweat on her upper lip.

"Oh, man."

It seemed so real, she thought, trying to catch her breath. The bear at first, and then that other horrible thing. She raised her head off the damp, lumpy pillow and saw a dark shape next to her on the bed. It was the book she had been reading when she fell asleep: *Dead and Bear-ied*, a gruesomely-detailed collection about people who had been killed by bears.

"Genius move," Emily sighed, pushing the book away. "Get back to sleep now."

After replaying the dream over and over and over again, her mind finally let it go. She awoke in the morning to the smell of coffee and bacon, the sun coming in low through a crack in the curtain.

After breakfast they were back exploring the national park. Her dad and younger sister, Danielle, led the way while Emily—still feeling more zombie than human—brought up the rear. The short trail hugged the rim hundreds of feet above the Yellowstone River.

"Wow," their dad said slowly, scanning the horizon. "Those bad boys look like they mean business."

Although it was still mostly blue overhead, dark clouds had gathered in the distance. A few minutes later they reached the turnaround point. A marmot poked its nose out of a nearby hole. It stood on a rock and studied them. A cold breeze blew from the north. It was time to head back.

The sky had quickly turned the color of wet concrete.

They were less than two miles from the car when the storm hit. First wind and then rain. Emily had to hold on to her hat to keep it from being blown off her head. The big drops struck them from the side. In less than a minute, half of Emily's body was completely soaked while the other half, the side facing away from the canyon, was bone dry. Goose bumps engulfed her bare arms.

"April showers bring May flowers," Danielle whined. "Over someone's *grave*."

"Too bad it's June," Emily shouted, trying to smile. "You little goon."

But she knew how her sister felt. The suddenness and strength of the storm was scary. Their car suddenly felt very far away.

Since the morning began clear and this was such a short hike, their dad had left his daypack behind, bringing only a water bottle. Their ponchos sat nice and dry and useless in the trunk of the car.

The wind and the rain continued and were soon joined by thunder. At first the flashes of lightning and cracks of thunder were separated by several seconds. But the electrical part of the storm was coming their way.

"Come on!" their dad shouted as he stepped off the trail.

It was dark under the trees, very dark. But at least it gave them some shelter and a chance to regroup. Thunder exploded overhead as they huddled together.

"They're going t-t-t-to find our bones here," Danielle cried, her lips beginning to turn a little blue.

Emily suddenly found herself staring down at a pile of bear scat. There were pine nuts in it. And it was steaming. She began shaking.

Stories from the bear attack book ripped through her mind. The woman who had been running on a trail with two friends before a bear tore into her. The boy pulled out of a tent and dragged off to his death, his screams echoing in the night. Another woman going on the roof of her cabin to escape a bear. The bear following her. Three teenage boys stalked and killed by a bear while fishing. Their bodies found together under a pile of leaves, the bear hovering over them, protecting its kill.

"Daaad," Emily called, the nightmare back and as fresh as the feces at her feet.

Just then a bright flash filled the forest followed almost immediately by another deafening roar overhead. With her ears ringing, her eyes desperately tried to adjust to the dark again.

Suddenly, Emily made out a large shape lumbering toward them from the far end of the grove. She couldn't be sure what she really saw, if anything, but at that moment she felt a terror no horror movie could match. She clenched her teeth to hold back the scream that had swallowed her mind.

"We've got to get moving," their dad shouted. "This is no good."

He grabbed Danielle by the hand and began running downhill. Emily didn't hesitate. She was too scared to look back. The storm was still raging, the thunder and lightning continuing their assault. But in a few minutes, with the blood pumping hard through her body, Danielle had stopped shivering and her lips were no longer blue. Emily felt better, too. She hoped the bear, whether flesh and blood or a phantom of her imagination, was somewhere far behind them.

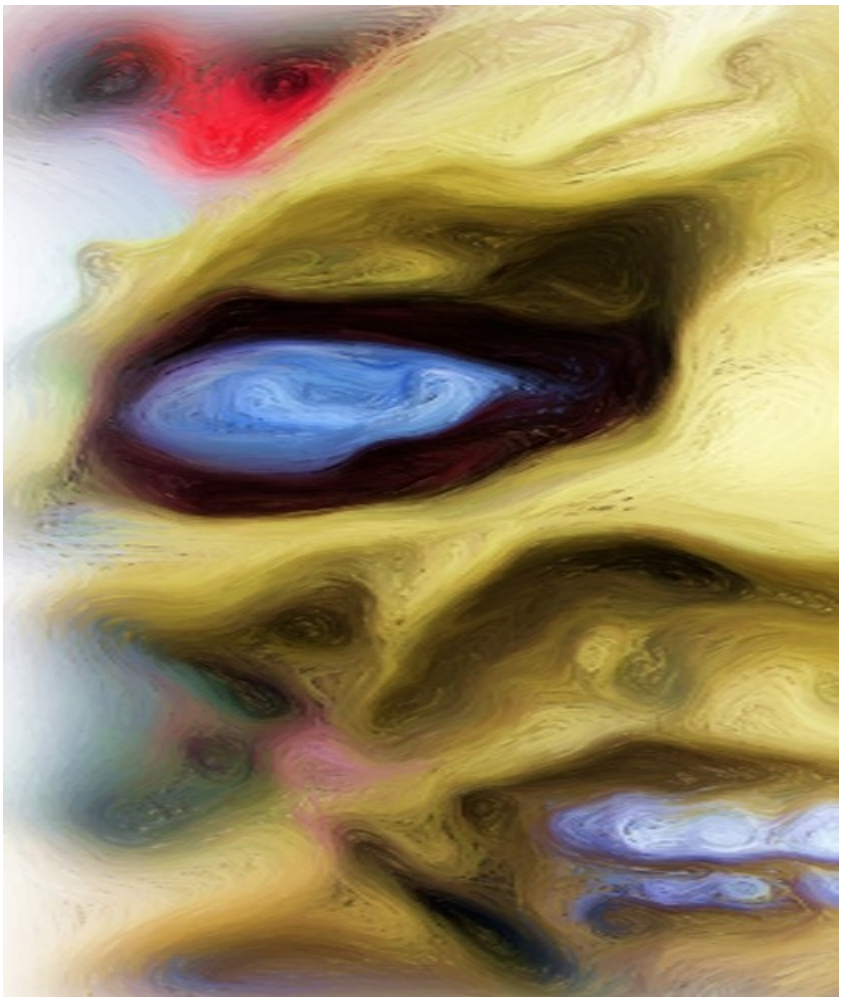
Like the rain, they kept dropping down and eventually reached a road. They started walking in the direction of the parking lot.

"We're gonna make it," their dad said as the storm began to subside. "Look, I think I see the car."

***

Good, they're getting closer, the thing hiding in the trunk thought, thick saliva filling its mouth and dribbling down onto the ponchos. *So close now. I must remember to leave something for the bears. After all, they help get the juices flowing, making the meat all the more amazing. And they get the blame. While I, oh, I get the morsels. And what sweet morsels these three will*

be. Mmmm, the smells are all around me. They're just a few feet away now. That's right. It's warm and cozy in here. Hurry inside. That's right. Mmmm. That's so right.



Love Mix

Allison was determined to declutter her home.

She had made it her number one New Year's resolution.

And she knew exactly where to begin. That drawer in the kitchen. *The* drawer.

The one she used for everything from tools to spare change to dead batteries to old telephone bills to inkless pens to shriveled up crepe party ribbons.

The drawer perfectly captured her "organizational skills." She had none. But that was about to change.

"You're going down, mister," she said and pulled the drawer out and placed it on the table.

She started sorting through the contents, not hesitating to throw out anything that didn't immediately strike her as useful.

"I feel better already," Allison said, smiling.

Then she found an old CD.

Love Mix was written on it with a red permanent marker. There was a little heart with an arrow going through it.

"Oh, yeah," she whispered. "Walter gave me this last Valentine's Day."

She stared off for a moment, remembering her old boyfriend. She shook her head.

"You sure know how to pick 'em, Allison. Well, at least he had good taste in music."

She got up, walked over to the stereo, and put in the CD.

A song came on called *Love Hurts*.

"That's weird," Allison said. "I know this wasn't on there before."

Allison remembered liking the mix. She had listened to it often back when Walter had first given it to her. Back when she still liked him.

The next song was the same song performed by a different artist. Allison hit the forward button.

Roy Orbison sang *Love Hurts*. She pushed forward again. Joan Jett sang *Love Hurts*. She advanced the playlist to the next track. Nazareth sang *Love Hurts*.

The entire CD was made up of different versions of the same song. Gram Parsons with Emmylou Harris, Emmylou Harris alone, the Everly Brothers, the sisters from Heart, Rod Stewart, Cher, The Who, and Pat Boone. Pat Boone!

They were all on there.

Allison forgot about the drawer.

She found herself picking up the phone and dialing Walter's number, not really knowing why.

"Hello."

"Hello, uh, is Walter there?"

"I'm sorry," the voice on the other end of the line said. "Walter died last week. Who is this?"

Allison hung up. Just then there was a loud knock at the door.

She looked out through the peephole. There was no one there.

She opened the door anyway. An icy breeze blew into Allison's face, forcing her to squint.

When she opened her eyes again, she saw that there was someone standing there after all.

It was Walter. Or what was left of him.

His skin was livid and gray. There was a large hole in his chest. He was holding something out in his lifeless hands.

"You broke my heart, Allison," he said. "See?"

In his hands was his broken heart. It was crying tears of blood, dripping down onto the floor.

"You were always a pig, Walter," Allison said before slamming the door. "You know how hard it is to get out blood stains?"

Under

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when you're under the knife.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when you've come to the end of your life.

There's something wrong with the way your leg looks, all green and leaking pus.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks when they throw you under the bus.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* looks.

It's not my fave.

There's something wrong with the way the word *under* cooks when your brain's in the microwave.

AAAH!

Hissy Fit

Will was hiking in Zion National Park on a sunny afternoon in late October. He was on a narrow path carved into a canyon wall hundreds of feet above the valley floor. The views were awesome, but more than a little scary.

When Will turned a corner, he found a large rattlesnake curled up in the middle of the trail.

Will stopped dead in his tracks as a cold chill blew up and down his spine.

"Whoa," he said, holding his hand out. "Whoa."

The snake lifted its head and shook its rattle.

The path here was no more than six feet wide and there was no way around the snake.

Will decided to wait it out. *It will probably move in a few minutes*, he told himself.

He walked back down the trail and found a large stone to sit on. He passed the time looking at photos he had taken earlier on his digital camera.

After a while he got back on the trail. When he turned the corner, the snake was still there. It hadn't moved.

"All right," Will sighed. "Enough is enough. You're gonna have to let me pass."

He found a few small rocks and started throwing them at the snake, taking care not to hit it.

The rattler hissed, licking the air with its tongue, but stood its ground.

"C'mon now," Will said, beginning to lose his patience.

He found some larger rocks to throw, but the snake still refused to move.

"Quit it," Will shouted. "Just quit it."

He started looking for a branch. It took him a few minutes but he found a long stick that would do the trick. It even had a *Y* shape at one end.

He carefully approached the snake and held out the stick with a shaky hand. The snake rattled loudly.

Then Will began to lift the snake off the ground. His plan was to swing it back onto the trail behind him, but the snake was too heavy. As he held it out over the precipice, Will lost his grip on the stick and the snake fell.

It dropped down, getting smaller and smaller until it finally disappeared from view.

"That wasn't my intention," Will said, looking down. "I didn't mean you no harm. I hope you understand."

A few hours later Will was down on the valley floor and less than a mile from his car. It was getting dark and cold.

He stepped through a narrow section where two rock walls came together and then started crossing a long wooden bridge. He stopped half way and looked down at the water. There was something down there. It took a few seconds for his eyes to adjust and his brain to wrap itself around the scene.

Snakes.

There were dozens and dozens of snakes down in the water. And they all seemed to be looking up at the bridge, looking up at Will.

Will backed away in horror and that's when he heard the rattling. It was coming from the far end of the bridge. He took a few steps toward the hellish sound and saw a large pile of writhing snakes in the middle of the bridge. And then all at once the snakes went silent and looked in his direction.

Will turned around and started running. He had almost reached the other end of the bridge when he heard more rattling coming from directly in front of him. There an even larger mound of snakes blocking his escape.

Again, the snakes stopped rattling and looked directly at him. Then they started to slither in his direction. Will screamed and began backing up slowly, then running back toward the center of the bridge. The other group of snakes was still there, closing in. He thought about jumping into the river for a moment and then remembered what he had seen down there in the water.

He was trapped, completely trapped.

Will's lungs tried to suck in all the world's oxygen in one uneven breath and his brain told him that this was impossible. But his ears and eyes said something else.

The snakes moved closer and closer, their eyes glowing with red hatred, and Will screamed again.

"Please!" he shouted. "I didn't mean it. I didn't mean it!"

The snakes slithered and hissed and rattled and rattled and hissed and slithered. Closer and closer they came, until Will was surrounded by hundreds and hundreds of glowing, red eyes in the night.

Will screamed and screamed and screamed.

And then he was quiet.

All was quiet.

Except for the sound of snakes slithering ever so silently.

All was quiet.

All was quiet.

[Pause and scream...]

AAAH!

The Strand

Lori liked the library. It was a good place to study, quiet and always open late.

Tonight it was completely empty. From where she sat, Lori couldn't see another human being. It was just her and all those books. Lori wondered if the old librarian had closed up for the night and forgotten to tell her.

She shook the thought out of her head and opened the heavy chemistry book in front of her.

She noticed a strange strand of black hair next to her hand.

"Creepy," she whispered, grabbing it between her fingers.

It felt thick and coarse and prickly to the touch.

Lori began pulling at it and saw that the other end trailed off the edge of the desk. She pulled some more. The hair lifted off the surface of the desk now and Lori followed it with her eyes through the air, up, way up, until it disappeared between two ceiling tiles.

Lori kept pulling. She pulled and pulled. At some point she began wrapping the hair around her wrist like she was reeling in a kite.

"This is freakish," she said out loud.

Suddenly a loud crash came from the roof and shook the entire building. The lights flickered.

"What was that?" Lori shouted.

Then she felt something wet on her hand. When she looked down she saw that she was bleeding. Blood ran down her hand, down her fingers, down from under the wrapped strand of hair.

Lori began trying to pull it off, but it just wound itself tighter and tighter around her wrist.

"That hurts," she cried. "Get off me."

She began pulling at it again. It was taut now, running from her bloody hand to the ceiling in a straight line. Lori tugged at it sharply, thinking it might snap off. Instead the tiles began to tremble.

A moment later they gave way and something heavy crashed to the ground just beyond the desk.

Lori stood up. And saw it.

It was a head with a horrible pale face, covered with long, black hair.

It turned to face Lori and opened its mouth.

"Get your own hair," it said. "This one's mine."

Suddenly Lori felt the hair on her own head standing, stretching, pulling… pulling itself out. All at once. The tears exploded from her eyes.

She screamed.

A moment later the head was gone. And so was *all of Lori's hair*.

Papier-Mâché Man

Waldo made a life-sized papier-mâché man for Halloween. It took him more than a week to complete the project.

When it was finished, it didn't look right. It was the face. Its features were off. The eyes were glazed over, the dull paint doing nothing to bring them to life. The smile was just a black circle.

"I'll put some clothes on it," Waldo said. "That will help make it look more real."

At some point Waldo decided to dress him as a scarecrow.

On Halloween night he placed his creation on a hay bale on the front porch and lit it with some strobe lights.

Not bad, Waldo thought. *Dude ended up looking pretty good.*

A storm cut down on the number of trick-or-treaters. Waldo sat on his sofa in front of the fireplace and ate their candy. He started getting sleepy and then drifted off.

A loud knock woke him. He looked at his watch and shook his head.

"Kinda late to be out here," Waldo said, noticing that it was almost 11 o'clock.

"My thoughts exactly," the dark figure said.

"Let me see if I have some more candy here," Waldo said.

"Oh, I'm not here for candy," the man said.

"What? What do you mean?" Waldo said, rubbing his face. "What are you here for then?"

"I'm here for your soul," the man said.

Waldo realized at that moment that his visitor was dressed just like the papier-mâché scarecrow. And then as he switched on the lights, he saw that he had the same exact face, right down to the dull eyes and round mouth. It *was* the papier-mâché man. Somehow, it had come to life.

"Bu-bu-bu-but the Scarecrow was supposed to be missing a brain."

"All right," the man said. "I'll take that, too."

Waldo tried to close the door but the man stuck his boot out and pushed his way inside the house. Waldo ran off toward the bedrooms. The papier-mâché man walked after him. There was no hurry.

"I'm here for your soul, Waldo. *And your brain*," it said, chuckling. "And there's nothing you can do about it."

In the morning the papier-mâché man sat drinking espresso at the breakfast bar. Then he took a bite from his chocolate croissant and smiled a real smile.

Waldo sat out on the porch. His eyes glazed over, his smile a black circle, the inside of his head empty.

Gone to the Dogs

One day zombies began eating dog brains.

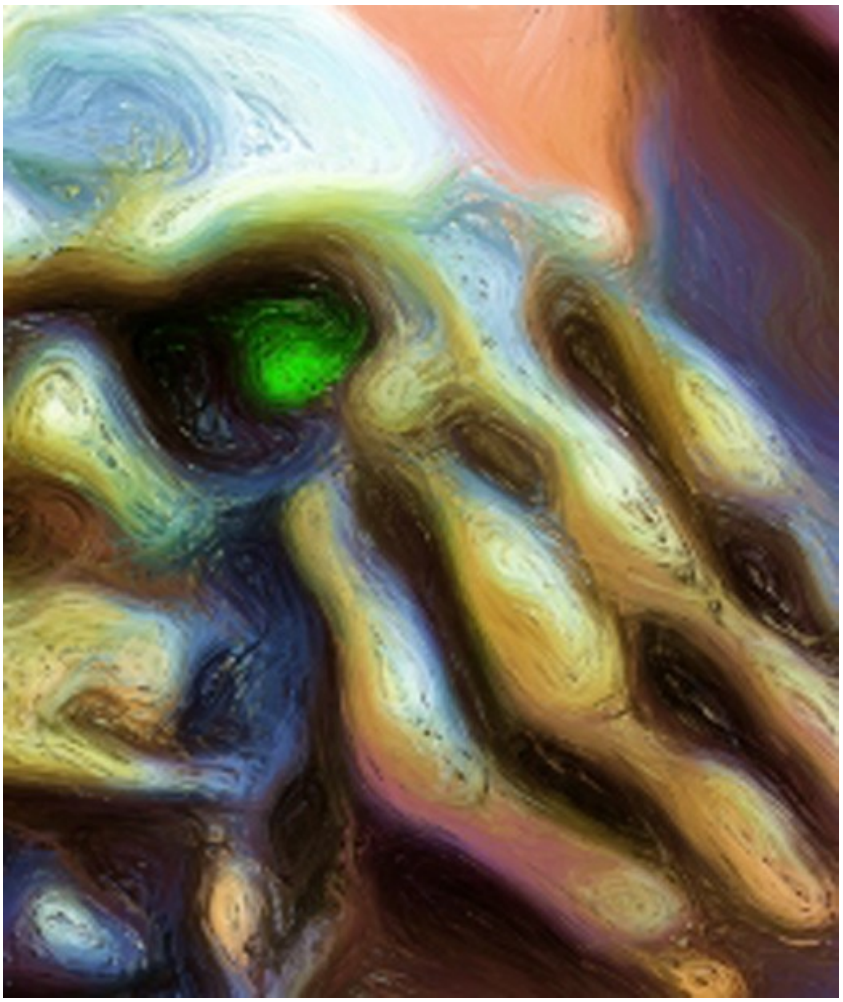
It was bound to have side effects.

They soon lost their ability to say “brains” and began barking and howling. They spent their days scratching and licking themselves and sniffing other zombies’ butts.

Some humans began putting collars on this new breed of undead and walking them. They weren’t very good at fetching or hunting, but people grew attached to them just the same.

Surprisingly, dogs weren’t missed all that much.

The transformation was complete when zombie parks started springing up.



The Dead Boy

"*You're almost home*," the voice said. "*Hooooooooome*."

At least it sounded like it could have been a voice. And if indeed it was a voice, those could have been the words it was saying. Or it could just have been like one of those EVPs they play on ghost investigation shows where whatever was recorded doesn't sound anything remotely like the subtitle at the bottom of the screen.

Either way, right now Malcolm had bigger problems.

The wind was really blowing. Whitecaps covered the water. Malcolm was glad he was close to shore. He wouldn't want to be out in the middle of the lake with this thing blowing.

He paddled over to the shore, jumped out, and dragged the kayak over the smooth rock shelf. He dug into his daypack and ripped out the map. Nothing on it matched up to real life. He had to be lost. This giant lake didn't seem to be near where he should be or thought he should be. Nowhere near. The map made no sense to him as it danced in the wind. He took out his compass and lined up north with north on the map. It still didn't add up. He had no idea where he was.

No freakin' idea.

At least the wind was good for something, Malcolm thought as he turned back toward the water. It kept away those horrible black flies and man-eating mosquitoes that had tortured him a few hours earlier.

But returning to shore, Malcolm saw that the wind was good for another thing too. The kayak wasn't where he had left it. He looked both ways like a pedestrian at a crosswalk. No kayak. Then he glanced out on the whipped-up lake and saw it, about 100 feet out and getting farther away by the second. The wind must have blown it into the water.

Trying to swim after it seemed crazy. He would not catch up to it, just be lured out into the huge lake. And even if he somehow managed to reach it, how was he going to drag it back to shore in the face of such a monstrous wind?

"Now what?" Malcolm's brain screamed as the little boat got smaller and smaller. "Now what!"

He almost thought he heard that voice again, answering him somewhere beyond the wind.

"*You're almost home*," it repeated. "*Hooooooooome*."

The gathering clouds were getting darker by the second. Thunder was already rumbling in the distance. The sky was going to open up any moment now. Malcolm put on the cheap, paper-thin emergency poncho.

"I'm so stupid," he said, fighting back tears. "Stupid, stupid, *stuuuupid*."

The wind grew even stronger as the first rain drops fell. They were big and fat and came at him at an angle. Malcolm backed away from the shore and took shelter under a pine tree. The water hit the lake in sheets. He couldn't see the kayak anymore. He hunkered down and wondered if he would have to spend the night out here.

Eventually the storm began to die down. The wind turned into a light breeze and the rain became a mist. A rainbow touched down on the far end of the lake.

The yellow kayak was nowhere in sight, but the growing blue patches in the sky made Malcolm feel better.

"It's gonna be all right," he said out loud.

But first he had to go to the bathroom. He would have to use leaves since he didn't have any toilet paper. He walked deeper into the wet woods and found a sharp rock to dig a hole. A couple of minutes later, Malcolm crouched down and left his deposit.

Just then a bright flash lit up the forest. It was followed by a thunderclap that sounded like eight pianos falling off a tall building.

Malcolm started running back toward the lake, but tripped on a tree stump. He fell face first into the mud.

"Get a grip, fool," he said, getting up.

It was then that he saw it. At first it seemed like a large animal carcass. But as he looked closer, Malcolm saw the clothes. It was a boy. A boy about his age.

Malcolm remembered hearing about some kid who had gone snowshoeing last winter and gotten lost. He had never been found.

"This must be him," Malcolm said, feeling more sad than scared.

The head faced out from down in its lap. In places grayish-white bone stuck out through the rotted flesh. A small, black snake slithered out from the dark neck stump.

"The cold must have done that," Malcolm mumbled, not quite ready to believe low temperatures resulted in decapitation. "Yeah, he must have frozen to death."

"*Would have*," a gruesomely familiar voice suddenly whispered in Malcolm's ear. "*But I got to him first*."

Malcolm turned around slowly and saw it, hovering there less than a foot away from his face.

Something not human. Nowhere near human.

"*He didn't know it at the time, but he was looking for his home, too*," the thing said, slurping at the air. "*Now you're both home*."

Malcolm tried to run. But one, two, three steps down the trail something wet and slimy and sharp wrapped around his neck and pulled him back *home*.

Malcolm didn't even have time to—

AAAH!

The Way You Walk is Thorny

Dano is the best thing on Five-O.
He swings his little arms to and fro.
He's the son of Sonny.
But I ain't no dummy.
His hair could rip the head off a bunny.
Can't pull the wool over these eyes, dope.
He's part lycanthrope.

Dead Woman's House

A large moving van pulled up in front of the house down the street.

"Look," Dewey said to his younger brother as he looked out the window. "That makes three. Three families have moved out of there in under a year. All since that old woman died. I tell you it's haunted."

"Oooh," Louie said. "I don't know."

"We should go check it out," Dewey said, ignoring his brother's hesitation.

Two nights later the two boys snuck around the back of the empty house.

"Yeah," Dewey whispered as he turned the doorknob. "They forgot to lock it."

They walked in through the side door into the dark garage.

"Oooh," Louie said. "I don't know."

Dewey switched on his flashlight.

"Let's hope the door leading into the house is unlocked, too," he said, walking up the stairs.

He turned the knob and pushed against the cold door. It opened.

"Let's go, man," Dewey said to Louie, who was lagging behind. "It's like it's meant to be."

Except for a box of cleaning supplies and a thick yellow phone book in a corner of the kitchen, the house was completely empty. It smelled clean and alone, like no one lived in it anymore. The brothers shuffled slowly from room to room, but didn't find anything.

"Okay," Louie said. "Can we go now?"

"I guess," Dewey said, releasing a long, sad sigh. "Guess there's nothing here."

"I wouldn't say that," an old voice suddenly said.

Dewey stopped in his tracks.

"That's not funny," Louie said.

"Hey, that wasn't me," Dewey said.

"He's right," the voice said. "It was *me*."

Suddenly the room was filled with a horrible old woman smell. And then the flashlight went out.

Louie began to cry in the dark.

"Don't cry," the voice whispered in his ear. "I'm right here. I'm right here."

Dewey felt icy cold bony fingers wrap around his wrist. He let out a soft whimper before fainting. Louie stopped crying and started drooling. It puddled on the floor down by his feet, joining together with other fluids.

Everything had gone all phooey.

Dewey and Louie were never seen again.

Landfill Horror

Something vile crawled out of the trash dump. It stood without legs. It started walking, then running toward town.

Your town.

AAAH!

Scooped

The police officer parked behind the broken-down car. In his headlights he saw the silhouette of a young woman standing beside it. He wondered how long she had been out here in the dark on this lonely desert road, waiting for help.

"I stopped to look at the sunset and then I couldn't get it to start," she said. "I just filled it up, so I know I'm not out of gas."

"Let me give it a shot," he said, getting behind the wheel.

Nothing happened.

"Sounds like it could be the fuel pump," he said. "Take over here and I'll tell you when to start it."

He looked under the hood for a while and made a few adjustments.

"All right," he said. "Try it now."

"Now?" the woman said in the dark, suddenly standing next to him.

"Hey, you're supposed to be in the car," he said.

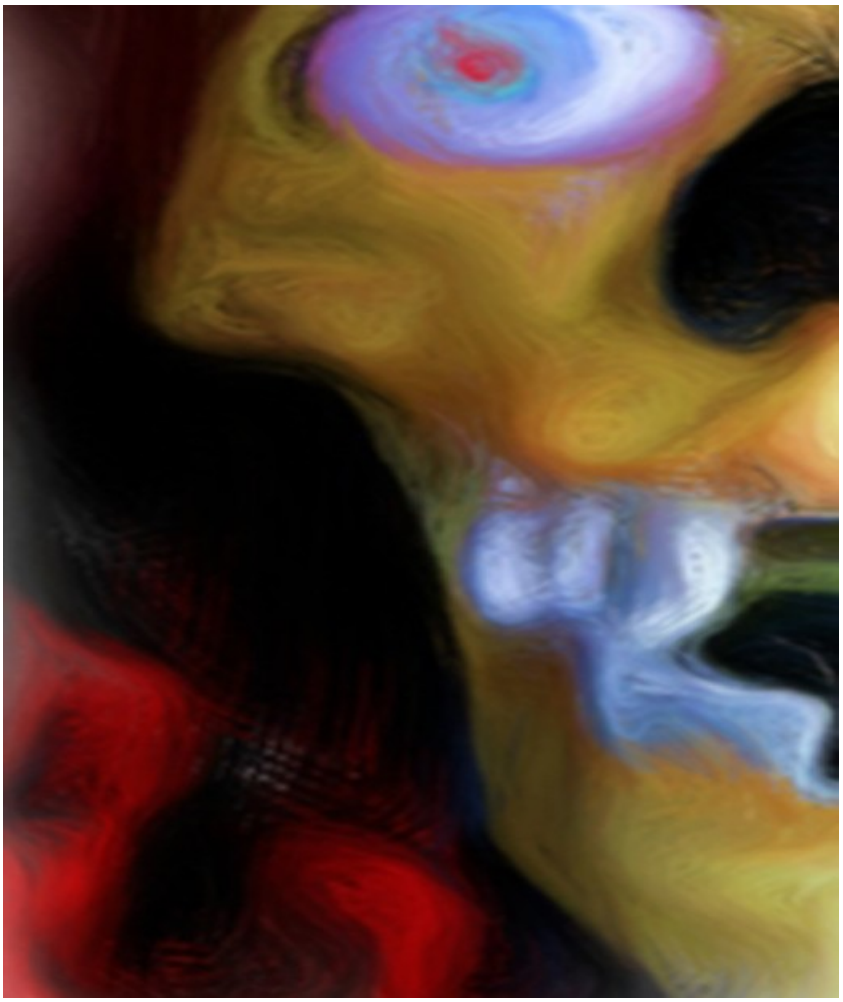
"I know," she said. "But I got hungry."

He couldn't see her face but her eyes seemed to be glowing.

The next morning they found the police officer sitting in his car, staring down the road.

The top of his head was gone.

And his brain was missing.



The Stare

Paul was going pretty fast. The old woman didn't seem to see him. She just stepped out into the street. Paul squeezed hard on his brakes and came to a skidding stop. He looked over at the woman. She looked back but didn't move. Paul waited and then waved, signaling her to cross.

The old woman didn't react and didn't move. She just stood there staring at Paul. It was an odd, blank stare. Paul couldn't read it. He couldn't figure out if she was sorry, angry, or something else. Paul stared back, starting to get irritated.

"C'mon, hag," he said under his breath. "I don't have all day."

The standoff ended with Paul giving her a "the hell with it then" wave.

He could feel her empty stare burning into the side of his face as he pedaled past her.

Old fool, Paul thought. *One minute she's all about crossing and then she freezes up and acts like a mindless mule.*

As the miles rolled by, Paul eventually forgot about the old woman. But the old woman didn't forget about Paul.

She went home and cast a spell.

A minute later Paul found himself flying through the air. His bike had left the mountain road and was falling somewhere below him. Right before he smashed into the ground and his body into a million pieces, he saw the old woman's face again. She was still staring.

It was the last thing he saw.

The Long Recline

As he drove through the beach town, the young man realized he was tired. Dead tired.

He could barely keep his eyes open. He still had more than 200 miles to go before he reached his home, so he decided to stop for the night at the next motel he saw.

A few minutes later he walked into an old room.

Dust flew up in the air as the young man plopped down into an ancient recliner by the window. He coughed and looked out at the dark ocean and the stars above the water.

"Nice view," he mumbled.

After a few minutes, he tried to get up and head toward the bed, but the chair didn't seem to want to let him go. Nothing happened when he pushed down on the leg rest. The side lever was useless as well.

The recliner was stuck.

"Can't say it's not comfortable," the young man said, yawning.

He soon fell asleep to the sound of the waves pounding on the shore.

It was early dawn when the young man woke up. He was sore. More sore than he could ever remember being. It was as if his muscles had been swept out to sea. His bones felt like jellyfish. He tried to get up, but the recliner was too strong.

The young man looked around, confused.

A thick layer of dust covered his legs and torso. There was a glass of water on the little table next to him. He picked it up. There was something in the glass, but it was hard to see. Everything was blurry. It looked like teeth, dentures maybe.

He put the glass down with a shaky hand, the water spilling.

With a feeling of horror, the young man ran his tongue over his gums.

He reached up and put his wrinkled fingers in his mouth.

He realized the teeth in the glass belonged to him. *The teeth belonged to him.*

He sat in the chair all day long. Just sat there. Every once in a while, he tried to get up. But it was no use. The recliner was too strong.

He never got up again.

The Ghoul

Albert dumped the last shovelful of dirt onto the grave.

"There," he said. "Another one bites the dust."

It had been a bad week for the living. And a good one for the town's lone cemetery. Two fresh graves today. Three yesterday. If things kept up like this, he would need to buy a bulldozer or something. His old back and rusty shovel wouldn't be able to keep up.

The sun had just gone down. Albert leaned on the shovel, breathing hard.

Looking off in the distance, he suddenly saw something scurry out of the woods and behind one of the tombstones. Then dirt began flying up in the air.

"What in—" Albert said, walking toward the grave.

As he reached the marker belonging to old Mrs. Crenshaw, Albert saw the thing crawl back out of the ground. Whatever it was wasn't human. Not anymore anyway. The flesh was rotting and falling off its face. Pieces of brain were showing through in spots, the hair and skull no longer there. The creature gave off a foul, inhuman stench. It stopped for a moment and stared at Albert with dark red eyes as it chewed on something.

The zombie, or whatever it was, then made a sound somewhere between a wheeze and a laugh and walked back toward the woods.

Albert looked down at the grave and saw that the corpse—which he had just buried the day before—was missing huge sections. The entire torso was gone, as well as big chucks of the thighs and upper arms. The part that Albert found most disturbing, though, was that Mrs. Crenshaw's was missing her face.

"Hey," he called out. "You can't go around eating dead bodies!"

The thing disappeared into the trees and Albert gave chase.

It was dark in the woods but he was able to just make out the shape as it moved slowly and deeper into the forest. After a few minutes Albert caught up to it.

"Hey!" he said, reaching up and putting his hand on the thing's shoulder. "I won't have any of your zombie business. You can't go around eating dead bodies out of my graveyard."

The thing turned around.

"First, I'm not a zombie," it whispered in an old, weathered voice. "Although I suppose I understand why you'd be confused. And what would you suggest? That I start eating the living?"

Albert saw the thing's face in the dying light. The eyes were the same, but the rest of the features didn't belong to the creature he had just seen a few moments before. Its face had been replaced by one he knew…

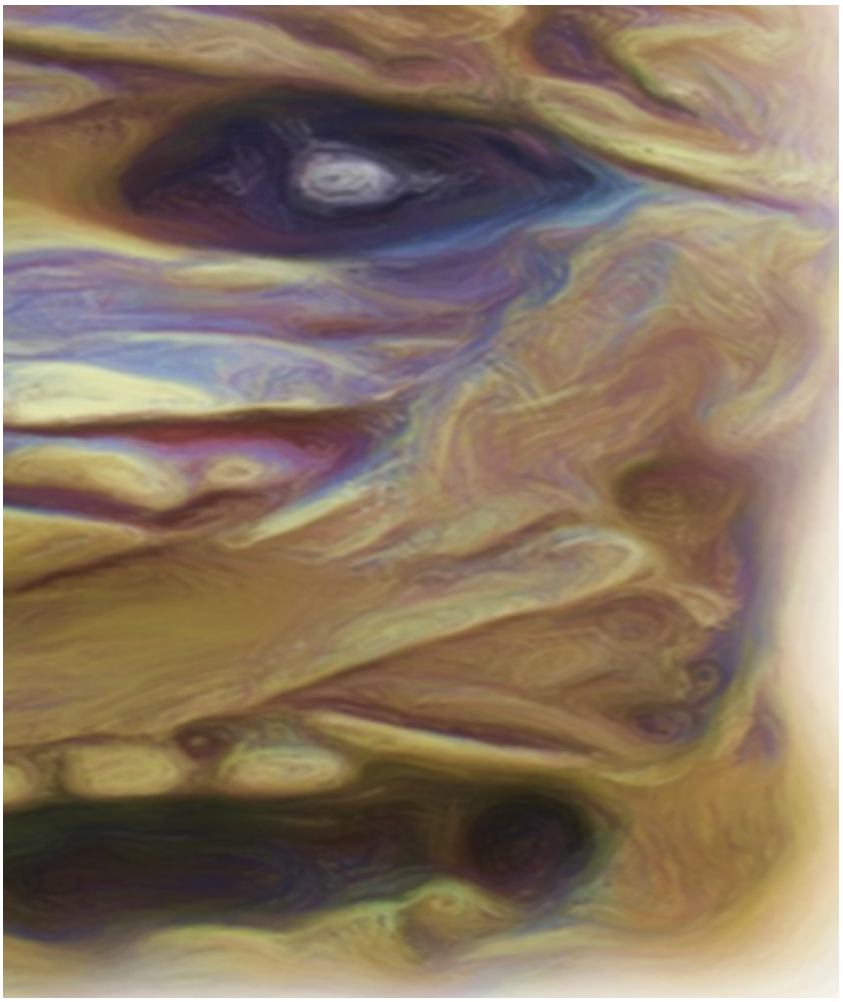
Mrs. Crenshaw.

She studied Albert with her dark red eyes and nodded slowly. Then she smiled.

"Oh, why not?" she said and laughed.

Albert screamed and dropped his shovel. The screaming got louder and more desperate and then finally died off. There was a tearing sound followed by loud chomping and slurping. And then it was quiet.

Albert walked back to the graveyard. The moon was out. Still hungry, he started digging in the dirt again. With his hands.



The Rathmore Academy

The Rathmore Academy was going through some tough times. Fewer students were applying, the cream of the crop had started going elsewhere, and money was getting tight.

The board of directors at the prestigious prep school was desperate.

"Grades are down," Dr. Clausen said. "The future looks rather bleak."

"It's a vicious circle," Dean Smythe said. "More knuckleheads mean our ranking will continue to drop. Lower enrollment means fewer tuition dollars coming in. And fewer dollars… well, I think you all know what fewer dollars mean."

The people sitting around the large polished table looked like they were attending a funeral.

"I think I may have an idea," the cafeteria manager said with a gleam in his eye. "But I warn you, it's a little outside the box."

Ralph thought it was pretty cool that he had been chosen. He was a fairly average student and had never won anything.

"We're starting something new this month," the school director had said. "Rathmore Academy is recognizing some of its outstanding students with monthly awards."

But as he looked around at his fellow winners Ralph had to admit that none of them stood out —except for their poor behavior or serious learning disabilities or both. He was pretty sure he didn't fit into either group.

In honor of their achievements, the students were treated to a special luncheon.

"I hope you enjoyed your last meal," the director said afterwards. "You've been selected to make the ultimate sacrifice for your school. We will tell your parents that you have been transferred to our campus in Switzerland. Just imagine their pride. *You* will write to them regularly. Several months or perhaps even a year from now they will be informed that you met your end in a most unfortunate accident. By then, Rathmore—having been rid of you and others like you—will be well on its way to a renaissance. You will all be remembered as heroes."

"You should not look at this as the end," the cafeteria manager said. "You will live on in our hearts. And in our stomachs. We will use your remains to feed your fellow students for the next few weeks."

At first Ralph thought it had to be some sort of sick joke. But then he saw the men dressed in white enter through a side door. A moment later they each grabbed a student and pulled out a syringe containing an antifreeze-looking green fluid.

Ralph didn't think it would work, but he had nothing to lose.

"Wait," he said to the man holding him. "I have something in my eye."

The man paused for a moment, perhaps surprised that anyone would want to rub their eye when they were staring death in the face.

Ralph kneed him in the crotch and ran for the door.

It was unlocked.

"After him!" the director shouted behind him. "Don't let him get away."

Ralph ran down the hall and out the front door. Then he ran down the sidewalk and cut through the park.

He needed to get far away and get help.

But who would believe him? The whole thing seemed so insane that he could hardly believe it himself.

He wasn't going to think about that now. And he wasn't going to think about the fact that these people would not rest until he had been silenced *forever.* He knew too much.

All he could think about right now was that his lungs were burning and that his legs were turning to cottage cheese and that the sound of the men's boots was getting closer and louder with each step.

Ralph kept running.

Fear

Lately John had begun experiencing a new emotion. Fear.

He had never been afraid in his life. It wasn't that he was brave or stupid. He just didn't feel fear. It was the same way some people are not ticklish or can't blink their left eye or like anchovies. He didn't think about it.

But one morning that all changed.

It started with a cup of coffee. He spilled some on his leg and it burned something awful. After that John stopped drinking coffee. He stopped using hot water in any form. Not even to take a shower.

Then he stopped taking showers altogether, afraid that the cold water would give him a cold that would lead to pneumonia. He started to smell bad and would have been fired from his job except that he stopped going. He was afraid of driving and stopped leaving the house. He grew afraid that the ceiling would fall on him, so he pitched a tent in the backyard.

He became afraid of the dark and went back inside and lived in fear. He stopped eating, afraid that the food was poisoned and would make him fat. He stopped drinking water, because it was too hot or too cold and reminded him of coffee or pneumonia. He stopped breathing because the air was polluted.

In the end, there was nothing left of him. Only fear.

Necromancy Gone Wild

Madison's dog died. He was old and sick and she knew it was for the best. But she still wasn't ready to let him go.

Three days after she buried the little white poodle in the backyard, Madison went down to the voodoo candle store and bought one she thought would help get the job done.

She rushed home, went up to her room, and locked the door. She placed the candle in the middle of the floor, surrounded by Scotty's collar, tennis ball, and favorite chew toy. She lit it and turned off the light.

The flame flickered and danced and threw shadows on the walls.

"Come back to me, Scotty," she whispered. "Scotty, come back."

She repeated the words several times but nothing happened.

"I should probably look from some necromancy spells online," Madison said. "I'm sure there's plenty of stuff on how to bring a dog back to li—"

Suddenly the room began to spin. Madison felt dizzy and sick. Then the candle blew out.

Madison slowly realized she wasn't in her room anymore. She stumbled around in the dark and heard whining in the distance. She walked toward the sound.

"Scotty?" she said.

It was louder now. More and more the crying reminded her of her dog.

It was soon joined by other dogs, all yipping or barking or howling.

Madison still couldn't see anything. Then she bumped into something solid, a wall or a door. She felt around for a doorknob. There was nothing there.

She could hear Scotty right on the other side.

"Hold on, boy," she said.

She started pushing against the wall.

At first nothing happened. And then it disappeared. One second the wall was there and the next it was gone.

Suddenly Madison could see again. The dogs were louder than ever, but as she squinted in the bright light she couldn't see any of them. Instead, she found herself surrounded by snakes. Thousands and thousands of snakes of all shapes and sizes and species. She was knee-deep in them. And then she realized that the snakes were the ones barking. Madison tried to remember the rhyme about red on black and red to yellow but couldn't.

What does it matter? her brain screamed. *Run. Run!*

But her legs had stopped working. She was about to scream when the largest snake slithered up above the others and raised itself high in the air, staring deeply into her eyes.

"Don't play with things you don't understand," it growled. "Death is not a game."

Then, as Madison watched helplessly, it sunk its fangs deep into the back of her hand.

She screamed in pain and lost consciousness.

When she came to, she was back in her room, sitting on the floor, the candle flickering in front of her.

Wobbly kneed, she stood up and turned on the lights.

"What a terrible nightmare," she sighed, reaching up to wipe the tears from her eyes.

That's when she felt the pain. She looked down and stared at her hand. It was bruised and puffed up freakishly large. And then she saw them. There, between her thumb and index finger… *two large red puncture wounds*.

AAAH!

Old Stone Bathroom

It was late in the day. Jim was almost back at the parking lot after a long hike. Through the wet trees he saw the bright yellow paint of his car.

"Yes," he whispered.

There weren't any other cars, which didn't surprise Jim since he hadn't seen any other people all day. The Oregon rainy season had started.

He had a long drive home and decided to start the trip on an empty bladder. He dropped off his day pack at the car and headed for the old stone bathroom he had seen by the trailhead.

After he finished, Jim turned the lock and pulled on the handle. Nothing happened. He turned the lock in the opposite direction with the same result. On the third try he heard the sick sound of metal breaking. The knob just spun around freely now, no longer attached to anything.

Jim's heart raced wildly as he pulled on the heavy steel door. It was no use.

He was locked in. Trapped!

Jim's breathing started going out of control.

I'm going to give myself a heart attack, he thought. *And there's nothing I can do to stop it.*

A small part of him realized that it was an odd thought for a man in his early 20s. But a larger part felt like it was a real possibility.

"Calm down, you fool," Jim said out loud. "Calm down."

He sat down in the corner and closed his eyes.

He focused on taking slow, deep breaths.

It took a few minutes but he was able to get his heart and lungs under control.

"It's gonna be all right," he said. "It might take a while, but I'll get out of here."

But then the thought started to creep in that no one would come for several days or weeks. That he would die in this bathroom.

He pushed away the fear to the edge of his mind.

He focused on making a list of things to try. The door. The screen. Check his pockets. *Too bad I put the backpack in the car. Still had water and snacks. Matches.*

It was getting cold.

At least it didn't smell too bad in here, Jim thought. That's not always the case in these places.

He tried not to think, just breathe. It was working. He was feeling better.

He opened his eyes and looked around. There was a steel grate at the top of the door. Maybe he could climb up and loosen the screws that held it in place. Clearly the lock was old. Maybe he could kick the door down. Maybe someone would come around and help.

Why had he locked the door? There was no one around. Who was he trying to keep out?

It started to get dark outside. And inside. The bathroom had no lights. It was getting cold, too. A dark fog began to seep in under the door. Jim felt a chill creep in through his moist T-shirt.

His hands hurt. He had tried everything he could think of. The lock may have been old but was still a match for his best kick or shoulder charge. The screws holding the steel grate to the stone were rusted tight. Jim just managed to cut himself trying to get them to budge. The parking lot was as quiet as death.

Why had he locked the door?

After the initial panic left, Jim settled down to passing the time. It would be uncomfortable and boring, he decided. But he would get through it.

After night fell, Jim heard something outside. It sounded like someone crying out in the forest. The faint, eerie sobbing filled Jim with dread. What was someone doing out here at that hour? And why were they crying? Jim thought about calling out but decided to wait.

The sobbing only got louder and closer. Soon it sounded like it was coming from just outside the door.

Jim was too frightened to say anything. He just sat there shivering in the dark.

And then the fog, glowing now, started coming through the steel door. Not under but *through* the actual door.

And then to his horror, Jim watched as the fog formed itself into the shape of a person. After a few moments Jim could make out a white-haired old man.

"Get me out of here!" the ghostly old man shouted. "For God's sake, get me out of here!"

He huddled in the corner, tears staining his wrinkled cheeks. He didn't seem to see Jim.

There was something almost familiar about the old man. Jim was sure he had never seen him before. And yet there was something there. There was something about the old man. Jim felt like he knew him somehow.

The night seemed to go on like this forever. The old man was quiet from time to time, but then he would suddenly cry out again.

"Get me out of here! For God's sake, get me out of here!"

Jim finally nodded off somehow sometime around dawn.

He heard a noise outside, coming from the direction of the parking lot. Rubbing his eyes, he saw that the ghost of the old man was gone.

There was a knock at the door.

"Hello," Jim said. "Do you think you can get me out of here? The lock is broken."

"Hold on," a voice said. "Let me see what I can do."

A few minutes later, the door opened wide.

"My goodness, sir," the park ranger said. "You're lucky I came along. Not many people hike this trail this time of year. I empty the trash and check the bathroom about once a month during the off season."

"Thanks, man," Jim said.

"No problem, sir," the ranger said. "You have a good one."

Jim pulled his pack out of the trunk and slid behind the wheel. He took a long drink of water and wondered why the ranger kept calling him *sir.* The man was at least twice Jim's age. Then he looked in the rearview mirror and dropped the water all over his pants. Jim's face was covered in wrinkles and his hair had turned completely white.

He looked just like the ghost of the old man.

AAAH!

Won't Get Ghouled Again, Again

The ghoul is no common fool.
He waits for you after school.
You taste the fear when you hear
Him whispering in your ear:
"I bet your corpse will taste sweet.
I think I'll start with your feet."
Look both ways when you cross the—

[Slap one hand with the other suddenly and loudly.]

Unearth the entire
O. Penn-Coughin Collection
wherever eBooks are sold

Download
The Scary Story Podcast
for free

Visit O. Penn-Coughin
at CoughinBooks.com
and follow him on Twitter
@OpenCoffin